

本好きの 下剋上

司書になるためには
手段を選んでいられません

第一部・兵士の娘Ⅲ

香月美夜

miga kazuki

イラスト：椎名 優

yon shima



Ascendance of a Bookworm

– Honzuki no Gekokujou –

**- Book 1 -
Volume 3**

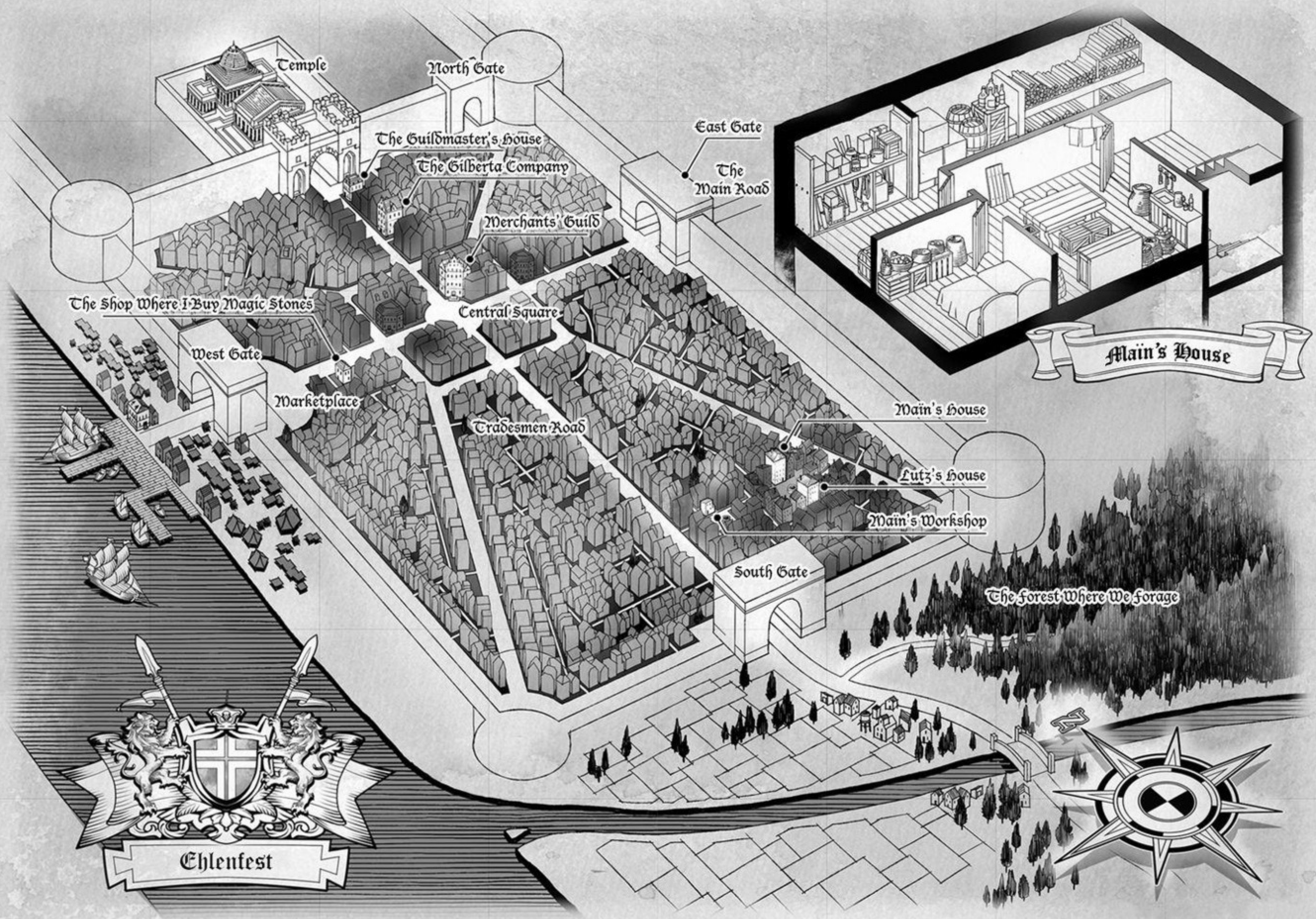
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Temple

North Gate

East Gate

The Guildmaster's house

The Gilberta Company

The Main Road

Merchants' Guild

The Shop Where I Buy Magic Stones

Central Square

West Gate

Marketplace

Tradesmen Road

Main's house

Lutz's house

Main's Workshop

South Gate

The forest where we forage

Main's House

Ehlenfest



本好きの下剋上

司書になるためには手段を選んでいられません

第一部 兵士の娘Ⅲ

香月美夜

miya kazuki

TOボックス

Chapter 50

Making Cakes With Freida

The next morning, I leave the bed for the first time and get a look at the rest of the room.

Whooooa, it's like a hotel.

The room is over four meters long on each side. In one corner sits the canopy bed, but there's also a round table, three chairs, and a fireplace. In addition to the simple furnishings, though, the floor is covered in a thick carpet and curtains are swaying in a window whose glass has a rippling, undulating design, as if to stop people outside from looking in. It may be a simple room, but it is very obviously one that a lot of money was spent on.

Also, near a chair by the door, there is already a servant woman waiting for me.

"Good morning. Please, wash your face here. When you are dressed, I will lead you to the dining room."

"A... alright."

She briskly prepares a bowl of hot water for me to wash my face in and hands me a clean cloth. I'm a little nervous at being treated so graciously.

"Please, change into these close. This may be rude of me to say, ma'am, but it would be troublesome for you to be seen in this house in your own attire."

"I understand."

The clothes that she produces look like Freida's old clothes. At the sight of them, however, my heart jumps for joy, seeing that they aren't extremely worn and constantly patched together like mine are. I quickly comb out my hair as well and do it up with my hairpin. The servant looks at my hairpin curiously, but doesn't say a thing. With that, my preparations are complete.

I'm led to the dining room, where Freida and the guild leader are already waiting for

me. I realize that I haven't yet thanked the guild leader for helping me out.

"Good morning, guild leader. I am very grateful for all of your assistance."

The guild leader nods slightly in reply. Freida quickly rushes over to me, then pats me on my forehead and the nape of my neck. I flinch when I feel her slightly cool hands on my skin, but she doesn't seem to care.

"Good morning, Maïne! It looks like your fever's gone totally away, doesn't it?"

"Good morning, Freida. I doing great! I'm feeling very refreshed."

Ah, was she feeling my temperature? Now that I actually understand the reason behind her sudden action, I give her a cheerful smile. She smiles happily back at me, and we both turn towards the dining table.

The guild leader harrumphs. "It's good to see that you're doing well, but this is all the help you're going to get with the magic tools. I bought these so that they'd be ready if something happens to Frieda, after all."

"Grandpa!" objects Freida.

"It's just like he says, Freida," I say to her. "They're things he collected for your sake." I turn to the guild leader. "Sir, I am deeply grateful that you sold me such a valuable magic tool. Thank you."

It was an extremely precious thing that he'd had to use his connections and money to their maximum extent to acquire. Even though I'll be paying him back financially, it was amazingly good fortune that he sold it to me in the first place.

"Maïne," he says, "think hard about what you'll be doing after this."

"Yes, sir," I reply.

"Now then, we should send word to your family that you're awake. I'll send a messenger; is there anything you'd like to tell them?"

I'm a little startled when he mentions sending a messenger, but I realize that there's no way that the guild leader would walk to my house himself. Sending a messenger is only normal for him. He calls over a young man, who confirms with me where my house is.

"Umm," I say, "Could you ask them if they could bring some '*simple shampoo and conditioner*' with them as a thank-you gift for Freida, please?"

We still call it simple shampoo and conditioner at my house, but it really doesn't seem to be the kind of name that you can immediately remember after hearing it just once. The messenger's face is strained as he tries hard to remember exactly what my message is.

"Sim-pull sham...? Um, I'm terribly sorry, but might I ask you to repeat that for me?"

"Ummm, if you tell them to bring the liquid that makes hair shiny, I think they'll understand. I'm sorry to have to trouble you with this, but thank you very much for your effort."

"Liquid to make hair shiny. I understand, ma'am."

As I see the messenger off, I notice that the guild leader is looking at me intently, stroking his chin. For some reason, I suddenly feel like he'd had a disturbing sort of smile on his face as he was watching me just a moment ago.

"You certainly do have some interesting things, Maïne," he remarks.

"That's right, Grandpa," says Freida. "I thought for sure we'd get her in exchange for that magic tool, but now I'm really disappointed we didn't."

With neither Benno nor Lutz here, the thought of getting cornered by these two is terrifying. They'd swallow me whole in the blink of an eye.

"The money for the magic tool!" I exclaim. "Let me pay you for that."

I'd be in trouble if I got overcharged for some reason or another, or if the price suddenly raised on me, so I immediately touch my guild card to the guild leader's, completing the transaction.

"You really *did* have that much... *Benno*," he grumbles, vexed.

Somehow, Benno managed to dodge his way through the net the guild leader had laid out to snare him.

Good job, Mister Benno!



“Maïne, please eat as much as you like.”

“Don’t mind if I do!”

It’s hard to keep my face from shining. I mean, the bread they brought out for breakfast is *white bread*! Real, white bread, made only with flour! On top of that, I can use as much honey as I like; isn’t this too luxurious? After stuffing my face full of sweet, delicious bread, I reach for the soup.

The soup is pleasantly salty, but I feel like all of the savoriness of the vegetables has escaped. It seems that, as expected, once they boiled the vegetables to completion they just threw out the leftover broth. This seems to be a pretty well-established practice in the culinary arts around here. The bacon and eggs are amazingly delicious, and for dessert they bring out a selection of fruits.

I’m deeply moved by this luxurious breakfast. It’s like something I could have gotten in Japan. The breakfasts of the rich sure are delicious. As I enthusiastically chow down, the guild leader looks at me with a frown.

“Maïne, who taught you your manners?”

“I wasn’t really taught, I don’t think?”

I’m not technically lying: I’d dug out books on manners and gone to family restaurants to practice them, but I was never actually formally taught manners. The guild leader, however, only frowns more deeply, looking at me with naked curiosity written all over his face. I, however, don’t pay him any mind as I finish my breakfast. If I let it bother me, I lose.

Shortly after breakfast is finished, the guild leader heads off to work. As Freida and I rest, we’re notified that guests have arrived. It seems that my family has stopped by to see me on their way to work.

“Maïne!” says my father, leaping into the room with outstretched arms. My mother shoves him aside. “Whargh?!”

“You’re awake!” she says. “I’m so glad. When Lutz told me that you’d collapsed in Mister Benno’s store and had to be carried to Miss Freida’s home, I thought my heart was going to stop.”

"I'm sorry to make you worry," I reply. "Freida has the same sickness I do, so she knows a lot of things about it that I didn't."

There is no way I could tell her outright that I just spent two small gold and eight large silver coins to use a magic tool. She's faint on the spot.

"Miss Freida," she says, "thank you so very much."

"Mommy," I say, "did you bring the *'simple shampoo and conditioner'* to thank Freida with?"

I couldn't really think of anything else to thank her with besides money, but since her baptismal ceremony is tomorrow, I think this is excellent timing for making her hair sparkingly clean.

"We did. I don't know whether or not something like this is a good thank-you, though. Tuuli?"

"Thank you for helping Maïne, Miss Freida," says Tuuli, handing Freida a small jar.

Freida takes it with a smile, bending slightly at the waste. "You are very welcome."

"We really are very grateful," says my father. "Lutz told us that Maïne was in a very serious condition. Thank you *very* much for saving my daughter." He turns to me.

"Maïne, you seem to be doing better; will you come home today?"

His eyes convey that he wants me to return home immediately. Since my family is already worried, I personally want to return home as soon as it looks like I can, but Freida stands in my way, smiling.

"No, as we discussed earlier, Maïne will be staying here until the day of the baptismal ceremonies so that we can keep an eye on her condition. I would be deeply troubled if she suddenly got worse."

"...Ah, right," says my father reluctantly.

"We're sorry for the trouble," says my mother, turning to face Freida and bending slightly at the waist, "but please take care of Maïne."

As I wonder if this is some sort of greeting, I lean a little bit closer to get a better look, but Tuuli reaches out with both hands and grabs me firmly by the cheeks.

"We're going to work now. Make sure you don't act up like you usually do, okay?"

"Alright, Tuuli. Come pick me up on baptism day! Good luck at work!"

My family rushes out, looking like they're in a bit of a hurry, passing Lutz, who is just arriving, on their way out.

"You're awake! How's your fever? Has it really gone down?"

Just like Freida had done this morning, Lutz pats my forehead and the nape of my neck, checking my temperature. Since he just came in from outside, though, his hands are freezing cold compared to Freida's, and I let out a yelp.

"Wait, Lutz! Your hands are *cold*!"

"Oops, sorry."

"Sorry I made you worry. I'm okay now, though."

"...You'll be okay for about a year, right?"

Lutz's lips are pursed, silently saying that we can't celebrate just yet. However, the fact that we put this off another year is itself momentous.

"Yeah.... I'll use that time to think about a lot of things, and try looking to see if there really isn't something we can do about it. First off, I have to make a book."

"That's all you ever think about! Well, I'm going to go tell Master Benno that you're awake. He said yesterday that he'd come to check in on you later this afternoon."

When Benno's name comes up, Freida suddenly scowls. She'd taken a step back at some point, but now that she's heard that she steps forward to muscle her way in.

"Oh dear, this afternoon would be a problem. Maïne and I promised each other that we'd spend the afternoon making sweets! Isn't that right, Maïne?"

Somehow, I get the feeling that it wouldn't be that good an idea to let Benno and Freida meet. I can't help but get an awful premonition that I'd wind up awkwardly sitting between the two of them as they glare at each other, caught between a rock and a hard place.

"So, Lutz, I'm sorry, but if you say you're going to Mister Benno's shop, could you tell him that as well?"

"Yeah, sure... but what are you making? Something new?"

Lutz, of course, finds the talk of my promise to make sweets with Freida far more interesting than whatever he has to do with Benno.

I shake my head, chuckling. "I can't decide on what we're making until I've talked with the person who does the cooking here."

"Oh my," says Freida, "you haven't decided yet?"

Until I know what kinds of ingredients and tools I can use, I can't really come up with any solid ideas about what we'll make. Also, if the cook is a cooperative sort of person, we'd be able to make something that might take a while to do so. If they're only just putting up with us, though, I'd prefer to make something a little simpler.

"I have no idea what kinds of ingredients or tools we can use, so I can't decide yet."

"You could make things with Lutz, though, right?"

Freida purses her lips, looking as if she doesn't understand my explanation. Since Lutz's lifestyle is similar to mine, the tools and ingredients that he has at his house aren't going to be vastly different from those at mine, but since Freida's house is so vastly different, I can't really even compare the two of them together at all.

"I only really tell people how to cook. At Lutz's house, I use his family's ingredients, and he and his brothers help out a lot. Right, Lutz?"

"Yeah, since you don't have any strength, and you don't have any endurance, and you still haven't grown up."

"I think we'll be done this evening, so I think we can save a bit for you to sample, you know?"

"Seriously?! I'm looking forward to it!"

Freida seems to be burning with some sort of sense of rivalry with Lutz, and after she scowlingly watches him walk out the door, she turns to me, cheeks puffed out in the most adorable sulk.

"You're too nice to him."

"Oh, no, not at all. It's the opposite. He's way too nice to me."

At those words, Freida only sulks even harder. To be honest, I have absolutely no idea why she might possibly be doing this.

Freida suddenly points directly at my face. "Alright! Then I'm going to be way too nice to you too!"

"Huh? Why?"

“Well, you’re my number one best friend, but I’m not your number one best friend, and that’s not okay!”

What an adorable creature. I want to mush up her little cheeks.

“Well, would it make you feel better if we did all the girls-only things I can’t do with Lutz, then?”

“Girls-only things?”

I start thinking about all the things I enjoy chattering with Tuuli while doing. Freida’s hobby is money. Playing with dolls like a normal girl is probably outside her norm. That might still be fun, but apart from that, there’s not whole lot of things we could do to spend time playing.

“Like, taking baths together and wash each other’s hair, or just lazing around on the bed and chatting about things, you know, things only girls can do with each other?”

“Why, that sounds wonderful! Well, to start, let’s go see the cook about making this sweets, okay?”

Freida grabs my hand and pulls me along towards the kitchen. There, I see a slightly chubby older woman who looks to have just finished tidying up after breakfast. She looks to be around the same age as my mother, and her demeanor seems to be much like Lutz’s mother, Auntie Carla’s.

“Ilse, Ilse,” says Freida. “About the sweets we’re going to be making today...”

“Yes, yes, young lady,” she replies. “You’re going to make them with your friend? You’ve told me about this very many times by now.”

“What kind of ingredients might we be able to use?” I ask.

Ilse’s raises her eyebrows the tiniest bit. “When you say ingredients, just what are you planning to use?”

“Ummm, basically, flour, butter, sugar, and eggs. We don’t have sugar at my house, so we use jam or honey, but if I might ask, do you have any here?”

Depending on your tools and ingredients, there’s a huge difference in the kinds of sweets that you can make. There’s a very good reason behind the fact that all I’ve been able to make at Lutz’s house has been pancakes and french toast.

“Yes, we have sugar.”

“Really?! Amazing! Um, uh, then, do you have an oven?”

“We do. Do you see it over there?”

Ilse shifts slightly to one side, and I can see a large wood-fired oven behind her. My heart quickly fills with ever-increasing expectation. I clasp my hands tightly together in front of my chest, looking eagerly up at Ilse.

“Since you’ve got an oven, you’ve got pots and pans that you can use in an oven, right?”

“Of course we do.”

“And scales?”

“That’s right.”

Ilse shrugs her shoulders as if I’m asking the most obvious things in the world; I, however, jump for joy.

“Woohoo! We can bake a ‘*cake*!’”

Recipe after recipe bubbles up through my brain. Of course, these are recipes that I know the various ingredient quantities for.

Huh? But... even though I remember the recipes, I don’t actually know how to translate grams into this world’s units of weight. What do I do now?²

Since I’ve been focusing so hard on the thought of making sweets, this completely slipped my mind, but you need more than just ingredients and tools to make sweets. If you don’t get the amounts of each ingredient just right, it’ll end up a failure.

When I was making parucakes at Lutz’s house, I did it all by intuition, which meant that the puffiness and thickness varied every time. Since my audience was boys who didn’t actually care about anything except quantity, I managed to pull it off, but if I want to make something in earnest, I need precise measurements.

Isn’t there anything I can do? Some sort of sweet that I can make without being able to measure things in grams...

I try to recall any recipes that I can make without knowing the measurements, and come up with something that fits exactly from a book I read on French cuisine.

“Ummm, I think we should make a kind of sweet called a ‘*pound cake*’.”

Pound cake, or *quatre-quarts* in French, is a cake made with equal quantities of flour, eggs, butter, and sugar. If we make pound cake, then it doesn't actually matter what the actual weight of the ingredients are. All we have to do is measure the same amount on the scale.

"I haven't heard of it," says Ilse. "What kind of sweet is that?"

"It's a sweet that you put equal amounts of flour, eggs, butter, and sugar into."

"You *really* want to make something like that?"

Ilse looks at me with startled eyes. I flinch a little bit, then walk back my previous remarks.

"...If that's not okay then we can make something else?"

"It's not that it's not okay, but do you really know how to make something like that?"

"Yes!"

I get her to promise to make sure the oven is ready by the time we're ready to make sweets, and then Freida and I withdraw from the kitchen. After that, we start looking for some aprons for the two of us. Freida, who has never helped around the house in her life, seems to have never worn an apron before. One of the female servants digs some out and offers them to us, asking if they're what we're looking for. We put them on, and then cover our hair with large handkerchiefs folded into triangles.

When the time we promised to start cooking comes around, we head to the kitchen, where Ilse is there. She looks down at us, a mirthful twinkle in her eye.

"Oh my, young lady," she says to Freida. "You look quite fired up!"

"That's right. I will be helping make it as well!"

Unfortunately, we don't have a cake pan, so instead we find a small iron pot to use instead. Then, we get to work.

"So, how about you start by explaining how to make this?" asks Ilse. "If I don't understand the process from start to finish I won't be able to make it."

"Of course," I reply. "First, we need to measure out the ingredients. Then, we need to warm the eggs up to about body temperature and then whip them together with the sugar."

"How should we warm up the eggs?"

"Umm, we could fill up a bigger bowl with hot water and put the bowl with the eggs in

there.”

“Ah, a water bath. Then, before we measure the ingredients, we need to heat up the water first.”

Unlike with a gas stove, we can’t actually boil water immediately. This is really obvious, but since I haven’t seriously made a cake before, there are absolutely going to be trivial details that I just won’t notice.

“Whipping the eggs and sugar together is the most important part. Once they’re whipped until they stand, then we slowly cut in sifted flour. Then, we add melted butter, but very carefully to avoid ruining the eggs.”

“We’ll need to melt the butter too. Once everything’s mixed, then we bake it?”

“That’s right.”

Ilse, who seems to have understood the directions, takes out a scale and places it on the prep counter. Then, she starts giving us directions on how to measure out the ingredients, which have already been lined up for me. While Freida instructs us on the use of the scale, Freida and I measure out equal quantities of each ingredient. Meanwhile, Ilse starts heating up the water.

First, we measure out the eggs and the sugar, then warm them up in the hot water. When they get up to body temperature, Ilse devotes herself to whipping them together. How frothy they are will have a big difference on the cake’s fluffiness and flavor. As she does this, Freida and I measure out the flour and butter.

“This should be perfect,” says Ilse.

“Let’s coat the inside of the pan with butter now.”

“Why?”

“It’s so that we can make sure it’s easy to take the cake out of the pan.”



We smear butter all around the inside of the pot, then lightly dust it with flour. Since we have neither a cake pan nor anything to use as parchment paper, we don't have a choice.

"Next, should we sift the flour?"

We start sifting the flour, taking care not to send it flying everywhere. We sift it three times in total, since it's really important that it be full of air.

"Oh my," says Freida, "the eggs were yellow, but now they're white, and they've grown quite a bit in size."

As Ilse whips the eggs, her whisk clattering against the bowl, Freida looks at her with some sort of envy. It's really obvious that she wants to help with the whipping, so Ilse laughingly offers the bowl and the whisk to her.

"Want to try?"

"I do!"

She happily starts whipping the eggs, but very quickly hands the bowl back. Without a hand mixer, making a cake is a very strenuous process.

"How does this look?" asks Ilse, showing me the bowl of whipped eggs and sugar.

"Perfect! Now we add the flour."

We set the sifter once again on top of the bowl and slowly add the flour. Using a wooden spatula, I cut the flour into the eggs and sugar.

"We'll mix it like this. Next will be the butter. Is it melting?"

"That's right," says Ilse, "after we warmed up the water I put the butter next to the stove."

"Miss Ilse, please switch with me. My arms are really tired..."

"Good grief," she laughs. "*Neither* of you two young ladies has any strength."

Smiling, she switches with me. We add the butter to the dough in much the same way, then mix it together. Freida brings the pot we're using as our cake pan over, then looks on with gleaming eyes.

"While we're pouring it in, we need to hit the pan like this so that we don't have any

bubbles.”

Since the pot is so heavy, I leave it to Ilse. Ever since the start of this process it seems that she didn’t think Freida and I could actually do this, so she helpfully follows along with my instructions.

“Now, once it bakes in the oven, it’ll be all finished.”

Since I don’t really know how to use a wood-fired oven, I think leaving that to Ilse is the best idea. When she opens the oven, a blast of heat roars out. She quickly puts the cake batter inside, then closes the door with a clank.

“I think it’ll be done by the time we finish cleaning up,” I say.

We try to help Ilse out as she briskly moves through the kitchen, tidying things up, but wind up caught halfway between help and hindrance. Freida, who can’t stop expectantly fidgeting, looks very cute.

“Is it done yet, I wonder?”

“Not yet,” I reply.

Ah, now that I think about it, there aren’t any bamboo skewers in this world, are there? How the heck am I going to check to see if it’s done?

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

- 1. The room is described as bigger than an 8-tatami mat room, which is approximately 3.6m square. I’ve rounded up to preserve the feel of the estimate.*
- 2. Recipes in Japan (actually, outside the US) are generally measured in terms of weight and not volume, so instead of a recipe calling for a cup of flour it would call for 120 grams.*

Chapter 51

Taking a Bath With Freida

I nervously watch the oven, wondering if this really is going to turn out alright. This pound cake is a dessert that uses liberal amounts of some very precious ingredients. Not only am I in someone else's house using someone else's ingredients, but this is also the very first sweet I'm making for Freida. I *cannot* mess up.

"Maïne, is it done yet?"

"How about we take a look?"

Ilse cracks open the oven, and I peer inside. I can see that it's puffing up quite nicely, but the back part of the cake seems to have browned more than the front.

"Miss Ilse, it looks like the back part is pretty well baked, so could you please turn it around?"

"Sure," she replies.

She pushes the cake pan around in the oven, rotating it. Even if I were wearing the same sort of thick mittens she is, I definitely wouldn't want to stick my hands into that blazing oven. I'm impressed by the kinds of things professional cooks get used to.

Ilse shuts the oven door with a clack, then looks down at me. "How do you tell when it's done baking?" she asks.

"Ummm, I'd usually check on it by sticking in something like a bamboo skewer; do you have any sort of long, thin rod with a pointy tip?"

"Hmm, the first thing that comes to mind is the skewers we use for grilling meat."

After rummaging about for a little bit, she produces iron skewers, like you might stick vegetables or meat on at a barbecue. I've never seen anyone use iron skewers to check cake before, but, honestly, the only way to find out whether or not it'll work is to try it.

...These are going to leave behind some pretty big holes, but since I don't have any bamboo skewers, I don't have much of a choice, do I?

In the past, when I didn't have any bamboo skewers I used a cooking chopstick, so I think it'll probably be okay. Ilse quickly sticks the skewer into the cake. When she pulls it out and shows it to me, I can see that a bit of uncooked batter still clings to the rod.

"It looks like the inside's not cooked yet."

"How can you tell that?"

"See how some batter's stuck to the skewer? When it comes out totally clean, that's the sign it's done."

By the time the inside is fully cooked through, the top of the cake is starting to turn a fairly dark brown. I think the oven might be a little too hot. However, unlike the ovens I've used before, it's not easy to precisely control the actual temperature, so all I can do is entrust this to the experience of this trained worker.

"Hmm, I'll need to watch the oven more closely next time," murmurs Ilse.

She pulls the pound cake out of the oven. Once it's removed from its pan, it's revealed to be a fluffy, round, almost sponge cake-like cake.

"Amazing!" exclaims Freida.

"Yeah," says Ilse, "this looks quite delicious."

As the two of them look at the finished pound cake with glittering eyes, an indescribable feeling of accomplishment wells up in my chest.

"It'll be really delicious if we cover it with a firmly wrung-out wet cloth so it doesn't dry out and then just let it sit for a couple of days, but how about we taste just a little bit right now?"

I ask Ilse to cut out a very slender slice from it, which I pick up with my fingertips and bring it to my mouth. Eating without a fork like this, before anyone else has been drawn to the kitchen by the smell, is the epitome of the kind of tasting that only those who make the dish can truly appreciate.

"Yeah, this tastes perfect."

I've only ever eaten this when it's in actual pound-cake shape, but even though it's just a circle, and even if the cake pan was an iron saucepan, the taste is all right. Ilse, accustomed to tasting things, takes the next little slice and pops it into her mouth.

“Huh, this is...”

Freida had been hesitating a little bit to pick up her own piece, but once she sees Ilse taste it, she hurriedly puts it in her mouth.

“Well now!”

Their eyes go wide when they taste it, then their heads swivel around to look directly at me. Their expressions look almost predatory, like the guild leader’s did this morning.

...What’s up with this... kinda creepy atmosphere?

It would probably be best if I escape from here before I get asked any awkward questions. I grab onto Freida’s hand.

“Okay then, Freida! Let’s bring this out as a dessert after a meal so that everyone can eat it too. Let’s go take a bath next!”

As we exit the kitchen, I look back over my shoulder, remembering my manners.

“Thank you very much, Miss Ilse!”

The two of us didn’t do very much *real* work when we were making sweets, but thanks to all of the sifting we did, the cuffs of our sleeves are stained with flour. Since we have more than plenty of time, let’s go use the rinsham and get pretty.

When we exit the kitchen, the female servant who had helped me out earlier this morning is waiting for us.

“You two, before you two go running about, would you kindly take baths?”

“Well now, Jutte,” says Freida, “you’re saying exactly the same thing Maïne is.”

Freida chuckles to herself as we walk. Jutte seems to have anticipated that making sweets would get us dirty and has already prepared baths for us. With a basket in hand containing changes of clothes, towels, and the jar full of rinsham, she guides us forward.

“This way, please.”

She starts descending the staircase in the center of the house, but I just watch warily. At Benno’s shop, the staircase in his inner office has a staircase like this one, so I know that it wouldn’t be unusual for there to be a staircase leading down into the shop inside a merchant’s home. Is it okay for me to walk down there, though? I quietly lean over to ask Freida.

“...Doesn’t this staircase go down to the shop?”

“It’s okay,” she replies.

Jutte passes the door that leads to the shop on the first floor, then goes down another flight of stairs. It seems we’re going to some sort of basement room. At the bottom of these stairs are two doors, one very sturdy and splendid, and the other ordinary.

Jutte opens the splendid door, ushering us inside. The floor underneath my feet is warm enough that I want to say that it’s got some kind of heating, and the room temperature is fairly high as well. There are two large tables here, covered with cloth, looking entirely like massage tables. (Later, I learn that I’m not at all wrong to think this.)

“Now then, please remove your shoes and clothing.”

It seems like this is a combination massage parlor and changing room. Prompted by Jutte, I strip out of the clothes I’m wearing. Freida disrobes as well, with the help of Jutte.

Then, Jutte opens another door, revealing a bathroom that’s about three by three-and-a-half meters in size.¹ At the far wall sits an enormous bathtub, as big as a family-sized pool you’d see at a hot spring in Japan, able to comfortably hold two or three people. The wide floor is made out of something that looks at first glance to be white marble, as is the tub, which is filled with gently lapping hot water. Next to the tub is a statue of a young girl holding a pot, and from that pot pours a trickle of hot water. Matching the flow from the statue, a little bit of water runs out of the tub and, heated by that water, the rest of the room is quite warm. The ceiling is tiled, and the windows near the ceiling overflow with brilliant light. Thanks to the room being surrounded by gleaming white marble, the room gives off a very bright atmosphere.

“Whaaat?! What is this?!”

Taken aback by the utterly unexpected appearance of such a grandiose bath, I unintentionally yell out. My voice rings off of the smooth walls. Freida, seeing as how I'm frozen in place, staring through the opened door, chuckles mirthfully, walking past me into the bathroom.

"Heh heh heh, are you surprised? This is a reproduction my grandfather had made of the baths found in the houses of the nobility! It's not something that we use very often, but since tomorrow is my baptismal ceremony, he gave me special permission to use it."

"So, baths... *do* exist..."

After more than a year without taking a bath, there's now one right before my eyes. On top of that, it's way bigger and more extravagant than Urano's was.

"They originally came from another country, and the nobles believe they they are good for your beauty and bodily health. Oh, just, please be careful, the ground is slippery."

Jutte, still clothed, follows us into the room. Only her apron has changed. It's made of a tough material that looks like it was picked under the assumption that it would get wet, and the skirt portion of it covers her entire lower body. The skirt is rolled up a bit so that it won't get wet, and part of it has been tied off.

Upon entering, she immediately starts washing Freida's hair, prompting me to hurriedly bring out the rinsham.

"Miss Jutte, when you wash her hair, please use this. You, um, pour it on like this..."

I try to explain to her how to use it, but her expression grows slightly troubled and she looks down at Freida.

"Jutte," says Freida, "would it be okay for Maïne to wash my hair today?"

"Oh, ummm," I say, "yes, is that alright?"

Jutte surrenders her spot to me, and I start to wash Freida's hair. Meanwhile, she rubs a wet towel against a bar of soap and starts scrubbing Freida's body.

"When you have a place like this to bath someone in and can use a lot of hot water, you can put the rinsham directly in your hands like this and then apply it to their hair. You

need to be careful to use your fingertips when you're washing their scalp so that you don't poke them with your nails."

"It's kinda ticklish," says Freida, "but it feels nice."

Freida's hair is most likely already being maintained by Jutte, I think. It was already smooth before I started, and glossy, too. There might not have been a need to use the rinsham to begin with.

Since there's a high chance that rich people have already established their own styles of cosmetology, I wonder if it might actually be kind of hard to sell rinsham?

I think about things like that as I continue washing Freida's hair. I wonder if I should inform Benno about this.

"Once you've washed all of the hair like this, then you rinse it out. Please take extra care to make sure all of it gets rinsed off of the scalp."

As I say that, Jutte pours a bucketful of water over Freida. When her entire body except for her head has been rinsed off, she quickly walks over to the bathtub and hops in. I stare blankly, wondering what in the world she's doing getting into the tub with shampoo still in her hair², but she rests her head on the edge of the tub, letting her hair hang down. Then, Jutte starts carefully rinsing off the hair that dangles out of the tub.

Oh *ho*, is *that* how you wash someone's head? I'm glad I didn't immediately say "oh, I'll rinse you off" and dump a bucket of water on her. That would have been pretty awkward.

In the brief time it takes for me to marvel, wide-eyed, at how rich girls take their baths, Jutte finishes rinsing Freida's hair off. Truly, an environment where you can just splash water everywhere is magnificent.

Now that Freida's all clean, I reach out for the jar of rinsham so that I can wash my own hair. With a splash, Freida jumps out of the tub and runs up to me, looking at me with brilliant eyes.

"I want to try washing your hair, too!"

"...I can do it myself, though?"

Is it okay for a rich little girl to do something like that?

I quickly glance over at Jutte, silently asking if this is a proper thing to do. She sighs lightly, then comes over to sit down next to me too.

“Well then, young lady, how about you help me? I’d like to practice how to use this ‘rinsham’ as well.”

“Excellent!”

She says she wants practice, but I’m pretty sure she’s really there to fix up any mistakes that Freida might make. Thank you, Jutte.

The two of them wash my hair, big fingertips and little fingertips squirming against my scalp. It’s almost painfully ticklish, but I manage to bear my way through it without bursting into laughter.

“Maïne, your hair is so silky smooth,” says Freida.

“It’s naturally very straight,” I say, “so it’s really hard to tie it back with a string since it just keeps slipping out. All I can really use to keep it up is my hairpin.”

“It’s a mystery to me how a wooden stick like that can keep hair in place.”

“Hmmm, well, it was kind of a last resort, since I couldn’t find anything else nearby that would work...”

When Jutte feels my hair is appropriately washed, she leaves Freida to continue working on that while she starts scrubbing my body. Since I can’t really run away while Freida’s still working on my hair, I have no choice but to sit there and let her do it.

“There, now you’re all clean too,” says Freida.

Freida, who has basically just been ruffling my hair for a while, seems satisfied with her handiwork and pulls back, and I reach for the bucket. However, Jutte quickly snatches it out of the way.

“Now then,” she says, “I’ll rinse your hair out for you, so please get in the bathtub.”

“B... but I can do it myself?”

“You are a guest here, Maïne. Please, go right ahead.”

With a smile, she forces me forward, so I get into the tub like Freida had, resting my head on its rim. I let my hair hang down, and Jutte starts carefully rinsing it out. She

pours warm water over it, gently shakes it out, and runs her hands along my scalp.

Ahhh, it's like a spa. This feels good...

I wonder if Jutte always helps Freida take her baths? Her practiced motions are very comfortable; at this rate, I might just drift off again...

"Hey, Maïne," says Freida. "How do you wash your hair when you can't use a bathroom?"

Freida's question snaps me back awake in an instant. This is *not* a spa. I can't fall asleep here. I look around for her, moving only my eyes, and see that she's quietly slipped back into the tub next to me, her head resting on the side of the tub in the same pose as I'm in.

I look up, past the steam hanging in the air, at the patterns in the tile mosaic on the ceiling, then start explaining how I usually wash my hair.

"When you don't have a bathroom, you'd fill a bucket like that one about halfway full of water, then mix the rinsham into that. Then, you soak your hair in the bucket, and wash it in the liquid in there. Then you wipe off your hair over and over with a cloth to make sure no liquid remains, and then you comb it all out."

You first dilute the rinsham to the point where it should be more-or-less okay if you can't get it all out of your hair, then you wash it over and over, then you towel it off many, many times to make sure that there's no rinsham left over. Even this was a last resort, developed when I really wanted to wash my hair but had no access to a bath. If my family had a bathroom, this wouldn't have been a problem.

"Is rinsham your thing, Maïne?"

"No, Mister Benno has all the rights to it. He should be about ready to start selling it soon."

"I see..."

Freida looks like she wants to say something, but before the words can leave her mouth, Jutte stops working on my hair.

"Should be all rinsed out by now, I think?"

"Thank you very much," I reply, sitting up. "That felt really good."

Jutte stands up smoothly. "Now then, I'll be in the other room getting the next things ready. The two of you, please warm yourselves thoroughly."

"Okay~!"

As soon as Jutte leaves the room, I slump down into the water, all the way past my shoulders. I scoop up some water, splash it over my face, and breathe deeply.

Ahhh... *paradise*.

"Maïne, you look like you're melting," says Freida.

"But this bath feels so *good*! It's so luxurious, being able to stretch out and soak all the way up to my shoulders like this."

"You're pleased with it, then?"

"Yeah, really!" I reply, my whole face breaking out into a smile as I nod. "I want to take one every day."

However, I can't see much of a smile of enjoyment on Freida's face.

"...Do you not like it, Freida?"

"It's not that I *dislike* it, but, it's very hot, and when I get out my head starts spinning."

"Oh, you're getting dizzy. You're staying in too long!"

I answer entirely by reflex, and Freida's eyes widen.

"Oh really? I was told to warm myself thoroughly, so I'm just staying in as long as I would in a normal bath, though?"

"Well, in a normal bath, the water starts cooling off pretty quickly, you know? This tub, though, has that statue, which is constantly adding more hot water. So, if you stay in for the same amount of time, you'll get dizzy, and it'll feel bad. Why don't we try getting out a little early today?"

"Let's do that."

Freida and I get out of the tub early. It's quite early by my own intuition, but Freida, thoroughly warmed up, is bright pink all over.

"Did it not feel good?" asks Jutte. "Are you okay?"

"We're done for today," replies Freida.

After we exit the bathroom, Jutte tells us that she'll give us a massage with a perfumed

oil, but I turn down the offer. I'd ordinarily be inclined to accept, but in my particular case, I won't be taking another bath anytime soon. After I return home, I don't know if I'll be able to clean it all off when Tuuli and I are scrubbing each other. I put on my clothes, dry my hair, and then watch Freida as she gets her massage.

"Massages... they're so refined," I say.

"I don't particularly like how long all this takes, but my grandfather says that if I'm to enter noble society, I'd better get used to this kind of thing."

Ahhh, I finally get it. She got in the bath even though she thinks it's too hot and doesn't feel very good, and she's getting a massage even though she's making that slightly bothered face, all to practice for when she'll be joining noble society. I have absolutely no clue to what extent, but Freida's life must be very different to what it used to be.

"...Ah, I see. If you have the chance to get used to it, then you really should. There's definitely going to be big differences in common knowledge, manners, and so on, after all."

"My grandfather said the same thing. That's why he's acquired a lot of things for this house that one might find in a nobleman's residence."

Corinna's premarital lifestyle probably wasn't that different from what it is now. I had thought that this house felt very different than hers had, despite the fact that they're both the houses of merchants, but it seems that the extravagance of the guild leader's house is not just because he's a wealthy merchant. The food, the bath, the various supplies, they're all of vastly superior quality here, and it seems that they're all things that the nobility have, gathered for Freida's sake.

"Wow, he dotes on you."

"...He's investing in the future. He's planning a lot of things ahead, making it so that I won't run into any problems when I open my shop in the noble's district, and so that we'll be able to make use of the foothold we'll finally get there."

Freida purses her lips, looking slightly dissatisfied. I certainly don't think that Freida's view is *wrong*, but all this is definitely not something done without any love at all.

"It's your dream to open a store, Freida, and isn't he helping you out with that? When your grandfather ordered your hairpins, what I saw in him was a man who saw nothing but his granddaughter."

"...Oh."

Does Freida, perhaps, really long for other people?

She couldn't go outside very often while she was sick with the devouring, and when she was finally freed from that she was immediately contractually bound to a nobleman. Since it's been decided that she'll be that nobleman's concubine, she'll be living for that reason, and making friends might be very difficult in such wildly different circumstances.

To live in noble society, she'll need to learn to be both stubborn and calculating, and she also needs to learn everything she'll need to know in order to manage her own shop by the time she grows up. I'm positive she spends every single day studying hard, all for her own sake, with the pressure of her very life, her future livelihood, and the expectations of her family weighing down on her. I think this must be an enormous burden for a little girl to have to bear. On top of that, although her family is spending a lot of money on her, it's obvious that they're operating out of their own self-interest, so she can't just quietly sit back and depend on their care.

Is that why she's so attached to me?

We both have the devouring, we're both already involved in business despite not yet being baptized, and if Lutz is to be believed then we both let our weird hobbies run wild. We seem to be quite similar. Compared to the other kids, we have a lot in common, and there's no denying that we get along pretty well. Is that why she wants to trap me?

"Maïne, this is amazing. My hair's so smooth!"

While I was spacing out, Freida finished her massage, got dressed, started running her fingers through her hair, and raised her voice in wonderment. Jutte, in the process of neatly combing it out, lifts up a lock of Freida's hair as well.

"Yes, it's turned out quite well."

"I'm happy you like it!" I say. "I hope it's enough of a thank-you for letting me use your magic tool?"

"Oh my, you already paid me for that, so you don't need to worry about that, right?"

Smiling wryly at Freida's very merchant-like words, I shake my head.

“I really felt like I wanted to thank you. If the guild leader hadn’t collected all of those magic tools for your sake, then even if I had a lot of money, I wouldn’t have been able to do anything anyways.”

“...I guess you’re right.”

We leisurely finish up in the bathroom and head back upstairs. When we arrive, a delicious smell is once again wafting out of the kitchen. It seems Ilse is tackling her second pound cake.

“I finally have a new recipe,” she chuckles, with a trustworthy smile, “so I have to make sure I memorize it!”

I’m thrilled that a tasty recipe is spreading, so I can definitely support this.

“Ilse,” says Freida, “since you’re making a new one, it’ll be okay for Maïne and I to eat the one we made earlier, won’t it? I’d like to enjoy some tea with her, please make some for us.”

“I’ll bring it out in just a bit.”

As we move to the dining room for tea, Lutz arrives, just in time.

“Hey, Maïne! I smell something *amaaazing*.”

I chuckle to myself over how sharp his nose is when it comes to smelling sweets. Lutz, though, turns to face me, narrowing his eyes and peering at me very closely.

“What’s up, Lutz? Is something wrong?”

“Uh, Maïne. Did you kinda overdo it today? You got way too excited about your fever going down, didn’t you? Go get some sleep, like, now. You’re going to get another fever from exhaustion.”

“Huh? Huh? You’re kidding. I feel great, you know?”

I pat my face, tilting my head doubtfully, but Lutz only scowls and shakes his head.

“You’re just too excited to notice it. You’re not looking so good.”

“Oh my,” says Freida, “but her fever from the devouring has gone away, and all we’ve done today was bake sweets and take a bath, you see?”

Freida, backing me up, lists off what we did today, her head tilted to one side. Lutz rubs

frustratedly at his temples, sighing.

“...Alright. Freida, when you don’t have the devouring, you’re a pretty healthy person. When *Maïne* doesn’t have the devouring, she’s still really frail. Whether she collapses because of the devouring or because of exhaustion, it’s fast enough that anyone who’s not familiar with the signs won’t see it coming.”

At those words, Freida and I spontaneously exchange a look.

“Maïne, is that true?!”

“Freida, you’re *not* really weak?!”

It seems like we’d arbitrarily decided we understood each other. Freida thought that since my devouring was gone I was perfectly fine, and I thought that the devouring had left Freida just as weak as me so I should be fine if I just kept up with what she did.

“I don’t really know what a bath involves, but anyway, since it was your first time, and you wanted to show Freida a good time, you put in a lot of effort, right?”

“Urgh... It wasn’t a *lot* of effort...”

It’s the undeniable truth that I’ve been feeling a little pressured this entire time, on top of being convinced that if Freida was doing okay then I must be doing okay too.

“You look like you’ve been moving around way too much today. Don’t take your own weakness too lightly. You really are weak, remember?”

“You don’t need to keep calling me weak like that!”

“It’s *true*, isn’t it? Aren’t you supposed to come home tomorrow during the baptism ceremony? If you get sick again here, your family’s going to get really mad, you know?”

If, after getting help in curing the devouring, I run around a whole lot doing various things to try to show my thanks, then straight-up collapse with another fever as a result, I’d be throwing the favor right back in their face. My father, who’s looking forward to me getting well and coming home, would be very angry, my mother would scold me endlessly for being such an enormous bother to Freida, and Tuuli would just be flabbergasted. “Why can’t you just be *good* for once?” she’d say.

“Aaaarnghh...”

“He’s absolutely right,” says Freida. “You’re here under my supervision, so I can’t let

you ruin your health on my behalf. Maïne, please, go rest. Alright?”

When Freida says that to me, a worried look on her face, I give the two of them a big nod.

“Okay, I will. Thanks, Lutz, for telling me.... Freida, sorry, but, would you mind splitting that ‘*pound cake*’ with Lutz?”

“Yes, of course. Jutte, please help Maïne get back to her room.”

“Certainly, miss.”

I’m led back to the guest room, and when I lie down on the bed, I’m suddenly keenly aware of how exhausted I actually am. My entire body goes limp. It seems that the slight hotness I’ve been feeling isn’t actually from having been in a bath for the first time in ages.

That’s Lutz for you. It just took him one look...

This was my first time in Maïne’s body working under the pressure of failure while making those sweets, and my first time in an actual hot tub instead of bathing as I normally do, so I had no idea how to adjust for that, I think.

Not only was I nervous about being in someone else’s house, but just as Lutz said, I was in way too high spirits.

Wrapped up in the soft, comfortable bedding and the warmth of my own body, my consciousness immediately drifts away.

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

- 1. The room is described as being about the size of a 6-tatami room, which is about 2.73m x 3.64m. I’ve rounded to preserve the feel of the estimate.*
- 2. When bathing in Japan, you wash and rinse yourself off completely before entering the bathtub itself. That way, the bathwater stays clean so that you and others can enjoy relaxing in it.*

Chapter 52

Freida's Baptismal Ceremony

It's very lively outside the bedroom door when I awake. A servant girl—not Jutte but somebody else—sits next to the door, waiting for me to wake up. She looks very youthful, probably not even twenty years old yet, and she gives off a very friendly air. When I get down off the bed and push the unexpectedly heavy canopy curtain aside, she looks over at me with a brilliant smile.

“Good morning,” she says. “How are you feeling?”

“It seems like my fever has gone down,” I reply, “but I can't say that I'm fully recovered, so today I'd like to rest quietly until my family comes to pick me up.”

She chuckles wryly.

“There was quite a stir at dinner yesterday! When the dessert came out and the young mistress told the table that she and you had made it, the entire family wanted to meet you. They were quite excited, saying that they absolutely want you to work in our shop.”

Wait, wait, lady, this isn't a laughing matter, you know? Did I somehow manage to narrowly save myself from certain death by going to sleep when I did? Should I just hide away in here for the rest of the day?

As soon as she said “your future is secure if you work at our shop”, I realized that even she was trying to get her hands on me, putting me on my guard.

I look over at the door. “Ummm,” I say, trying to change the subject, “it really is noisy out there, isn't it...”

“Ahh,” she replies, her smile widening. “The young mistress has finished breakfast already and is in the middle of getting dressed. Miss Maïne, when you get dressed yourself, I'll guide you to the dining room.”

“Um, I'm really sorry to bother you like this, but might you be able to bring me my breakfast in this room? I'm still not fully recovered, so I don't need very much, and I'm

nervous about meeting people for the first time. I'll lose my appetite, so..."

To be honest, since I skipped dinner, I'm actually pretty hungry. However, having met Freida and the guild leader, I can guess that the rest of the family is just as diabolical. Just thinking about being surrounded by those people while trying to eat my breakfast makes my stomach ache. I don't think I'd be able to get anything down.

"Heh heh," she chuckles, "Understood, miss. I'll bring your breakfast here."

After the servant girl brings out and helps me change into some of Freida's old clothes, she leaves the room. As soon as I'm alone, I collapse to the ground, head clutched in my hands.

Oh *crap*. Something *weird* is happening. I knew that the guild leader and Freida had their eyes set on me, but why does the rest of the family want me now, too? Is it because of the pound cake? But, they have sugar here, so they have sweet things, right? There was that one sweet they brought out for me before, that pizza-like thing baked with nuts and drizzled with honey, right?

This really isn't something I actually want to think about, but if sugar has only just started appearing on the market, then the art of making sweets might not be well-developed yet... that can't be what's happening, right?

As I lay there, head still in my hands, I hear the footsteps of the servant girl coming back with my breakfast. I quickly stand up and, with a careful nothing's-going-on-here expression, go to greet her.

"Please enjoy your meal," she says.

It looks like they figured out my tastes exactly after yesterday's breakfast. There's white bread with jam and honey, paired with juice from some sort of sweet fruit. There's not as much soup, but there's a proper full portion of bacon and eggs for me.

Under these keenly observing eyes, it feels like my weak points will be found out in an instant.

"Thank you for the food," I say, and start eating.

I feel like, once breakfast is finished, I should stay hidden in this room, claiming to still

not be feeling well, until my family comes to pick me up. The guild leader and Freida are menacing enough as it is; I can't face an entire family like that myself. I desperately wish that I could summon Benno and Lutz.

As I slowly eat my breakfast by myself, thinking about how I'm going to deal with what comes after this, Jutte bursts into the room.

"Good morning, Maïne. How are you feeling this morning?"

She's very hurried for someone coming in to ask me how I'm doing. I get the impression that I should keep my answer to just the bare facts, so I put down my bread and give her a foolishly honest answer.

"My fever's gone down, you know?"

"Might I ask you for your assistance with the young mistress's hair? I would like for you to show me how to put in her hairpins."

"...Sure, but can I finish my breakfast first, please?"

I can probably count showing her how to use them as warranty service for a product I've made. I'm *probably* not doing this because I'm being too eager to help, or because Jutte's staring at me strangely.

I finish my breakfast relatively quickly and then head for Freida's room, guided by Jutte. Her room is on the third floor. From what Jutte says, it seems the second floor is for the guild leader's generation, while the third floor is for his sons' and grandchildren's generations. Since the two floors are tied together by an indoor staircase and everyone takes their meals together, it doesn't really feel like it's two separate houses, though.

"Mistress Freida, I've brought Maïne to see you."

"Please, come in!"

In Freida's room, near the door, is a standing partition. If it were to be turned around, it could be used to section off the room into something like a parlor, so in one corner there is a canopy bed, and opposite that is a set of shelves that reminds me of a writing desk. In the middle of the room is a small table with a few chairs set around it. The curtains on the windows and the canopy are all done in girlish reds and pinks, but there are no dolls or accessories anywhere in the otherwise simple room.

Today, hairpins and several combs are lined up atop the table. Freida sits at one of the chairs, her hair combed out. With her pink, fluffy hair let down and carefully combed out, she looks almost like a life-sized doll.

“Good morning, Maïne. You feeling better?”

“Morning, Freida. My fever’s gone down, but I’m still not totally better yet, I think.”

In other words, I can’t do too much. When I give her my honest description of my condition, her expression clouds a bit, and her eyes drop.

“Oh. Sorry to call you up here. I thought that since you were the one to make your sister’s hairpin, you might have been the one to style her hair, were you not?”

“That’s right, so...?”

“Do you think you could give me the same style, please?”

Tuuli’s hairstyle involved bringing both sides of her hair together in the center and braiding them together in a half-up style. That kind of style wouldn’t suit Freida, but since I went through all that trouble for making two hairpins, and since pigtails are cute, I think the best style for her would be twintails.

“Hmmm, well, since I made two hairpins, instead of doing exactly the same thing, let’s do it in two parts. I’m going to braid it, okay?”

“I’ll leave it to you!”

“Please, teach me as well,” says Jutte, her eyes glittering.

I use a comb to separate Freida’s hair into halves, then start braiding one half of it together over her right ear, explaining what I’m doing to Jutte as I go.

“Gather it up from here, then match it to this, and then twist it like this to make the plait.”

“Gather it up from here, then I match it to this, and... like this?”

Jutte takes the left side and, carefully observing what I’m doing, starts to braid. As expected of someone used to working with her hands, she’s very skilled. Since my hands are small, though, and since I am by no means handy, no matter what I try to do the braids keep slipping out of my fingers and coming loose. Tuuli’s hair is naturally wavy, so even if a braid is a little bit sloppy and a bit too loose here and there, that in and of itself just adds to the overall grand impression, but the quality of Freida’s hair means that any such mistakes would just immediately stand out.

“Since you picked it up so quickly,” I tell Jutte, “I think it would be best for you to do both sides. My hands are small, so it’s hard for me to gather up all the hair.”

“It certainly does seem like it would be difficult to try this with hands as small as yours. Very well, I’ll braid the other side as well.”

Having already learned how after the first braid, Jutte sets to work, smoothly braiding the other side. Perhaps it’s because she’s working with hair she’s used to the feel of, but she leaves no holes or gaps as she works. Because Freida’s hair was so cleanly divided by the comb, it’s parted very neatly, unlike when I’d done Tuuli’s hair.

...Nngh, it really hurts to see my own unskillfulness on display like this.

“I’d be much happier if I’d had just a bit more time to practice, but...”

Jutte mutters fretfully to herself as she looks at Freida’s done-up hair. My eyes go wide as I notice how intensely she’s reacting, and Freida chuckles wryly, with a troubled expression.

“You know,” she says to me, “Jutte said that she really wanted to talk with you yesterday evening so that she could spend all night practicing.”

“Ahh, and then I got tired and went to bed early, so... I’m sorry!”

As I try to apologize for having caused her trouble by my feebleness, Jutte quickly shakes her head.

“Don’t worry about it at all. It’s your condition, you couldn’t help it. I was just thinking... if I had known how to do this earlier, I could have done the young mistress up even more prettily.”

Oh my, I see. Her hobby is dressing up Freida, is it? She is as cute as a life-sized doll. I understand perfectly! I, too, got fired up over making her hairpins.

Next, when Jutte finishes with the braids over Freida’s ears, I carefully insert my masterpiece hairpins through the string binding them together and arrange them so they won’t fall off.

Since there are four deep red miniature roses, no matter if you look at her from the front, the side, or the back, you can always see at least one flower. The way the spray

of white baby's-breath is set against her light pink hair makes the tiny flowers look like white lace, making the red of the roses stand out even more. The green leaves that peek out here and there accentuate everything *very* nicely.

"Yep," I say, "even better than I thought! These match you perfectly, Freida."

"You look quite adorable, Miss Freida," says the servant girl who had helped me get dressed earlier, while Jutte brings over the garments that Freida will be wearing today.

Freida stands up, and the servant girl takes the chair away. Immediately, every person in the room transitions into clothes-changing mode, and I hurriedly get out of the way. Freida raises one arm, onto which a sleeve is quickly placed; when she raises the other, it's also sleeved much the same way. Several people button down the buttons and tie up the strings, as Freida gets dressed without doing anything but standing there. I let out an amazed breath, watching the kind of princess-like dressing scene you'd only see in books or movies.

If it weren't for everyone's many years of experience, this wouldn't be going anywhere near as well. Not only do the servants need to know how to dress her, but Freida also needs to know how to *be* dressed, otherwise things wouldn't go smoothly at all. If I were in the middle of that, me trying to raise and lower my arms would just end up with me hitting someone I can't see, I think.

Freida, still in the middle of getting dressed, looks over at me, smiling brilliantly.

"Maïne, if you'd like, do you want to try watching the procession from this room? The windows in here were made specially to let me see outside better."

The windows of the guest room I had been in had wavy glass in them, but the glass in the windows here, in Freida's room, the glass is perfectly flat, making it easy to look at the scenery outside. It wouldn't be any exaggeration to say that watching the ceremonial procession through the windows here as it advances towards the temple would be like having a prime box seat.

"Can I?"

I glance back and forth between Freida and the windows. She smiles broadly at me.

"Yes, of course! If you're afraid to be here by yourself I can have Jutte stay with you."

I would indeed be uncomfortable staying in someone's room while they were away, so Freida's suggestion is most welcome.

"That would be really helpful, thanks."

"Certainly," says Jutte, "I would be happy to accompany you."

Jutte's face immediately lights up, probably from hearing that she can watch from this window. It can't be helped that she'd want to watch her mistress Freida go out in her finest clothes, and if Freida has her stay with me, she'll be able to see her in all her glory.

"Thanks, Freida," I say. "I'll watch from here."

It seems like all of the dressing-up work, down to the boots, was finished while we were talking. The two servants who were crouched in front of her feet smoothly stand up and take a step back.

"Miss Freida, we're all finished."

"And nothing's out of place, I wonder?" she replies.

Freida, completely done up, turns slowly on the spot. Her outfit is white, with fluffy, warm furs around her neck. It's embroidered here and there with bright red and pinks, matching both her hair and her hairpins.

"Well," she says, "this seems cute."

"Whoa, amazing, amazing!" I enthuse. "Freida, that looks really good on you!"

"Miss Freida," says a servant, "I've brought your family to see you."

It seems that as we were praising her, the rest of her family had been told that she was done getting ready and had come here to see. The first person to step out from around the screen is the guild leader.

"Oh, Freida! You look magnificent. Wearing such beautiful flowers during the winter's baptismal ceremonies, you look like an angel... no, a goddess of the blooming spring! You are truly lovely. As expected of my granddaughter!"

"These hairpins you bought for me really suit me, don't they?" she says, smiling, lightly touching her hairpins.

A broad grin splits the guild leader's face. "They really do. Your delighted smile is worth more than anything in the world."

The rest of the family starts to enter, one by one, as if they had been waiting for the guild leader to get enough praise in before interrupting.

“Whoa, Freida. That look really suits you.”

“Out of all the girls I know... you’re the cutest!”

Two young boys, about the same age—probably about ten or ten and a half years old—start to praise Freida.

...Huh? A little while ago I was thinking that maybe Freida wasn’t used to being praised like this, but these two boys seem to be acting like giving her compliments is no big deal, hm?

I tilt my head questioningly to the side as Freida looks up at her older brothers with a troubled expression, like she couldn’t believe that she was being praised.

“...Why are the both of you here?”

“Why? It’s Earth Day, so we’re off from work. Didn’t we say we’d be here to celebrate with everyone?”

“I’d heard, but until now I’ve never seen anything come from words like that, so I didn’t think you’d really be here this time.”

...Wow, so these brothers don’t keep their promises. With that kind of uncertainty, she might be convinced that their compliments were just empty words too.

The brothers, perhaps because they noticed Freida’s distrust, instantly grow pale and start coming up with various excuses. While they do that, a married couple wanders over, completely ignoring the situation and overlooking the two children.

“Amazing, those hairpins.”

“Yes, I want some for myself! How splendid they are.”

As I watch the chaotic family gathering unfold, suddenly, the guild leader leans down, thrusting his face in front of me.

“Ah, Maïne!”

Crap! I’d been planning to lock myself in my room so that I wouldn’t have to meet these

people!

The guild leader, not at all caring that I stepped back with a squeak, clasps my hands tightly, moved to tears.

“You’ve done so well. I must thank you, Maïne. This is the first time I’ve ever seen Freida so happy with something I’ve bought for her to wear. Just like you said, her delighted face is worth so, so much more than her surprise.”

“I... I’m very glad you’re pleased, I put a lot of effort into it.”

Eeeeeek! Save meeee, Bennooo!!

“There aren’t many other people around here who understand these feelings. From now on, when I buy a gift for Freida, I’ll consult with you first! Incidentally, Maïne, there’s one thing I wanted to ask you about... guh?!”

With a jerk, the guild leader is pushed away. For a moment, I’m grateful for my rescue, but it really is only for the briefest moment. The guild leader is suddenly replaced by many faces, crowding in to see me all at once.

“You must be little Maïne, aren’t you? I’ve heard so much about you from Father and Freida.”

“Yes, umm—”

As I start to try to properly introduce myself to Freida’s father, I’m spun around to face someone else. I blink quickly to reorient myself, and see Freida’s mother in front of me.

“Thanks for making friends with Freida. She’s been having so much fun lately and is smiling a lot more. As her mother, I’m really quite grateful!”

“Th... the pleasure is all m—”

As I start to try to express my own gratitude, her two older brothers shove themselves in front of me.

I beg of you! Just give me a second to get a response out!... Ack, too close! Your face is too close!

I’m panicked to the point where my voice doesn’t come out at all. I freeze up, my eyes

darting back and forth uselessly. The brothers, without any reservation, poke at me and pat my head.

“Huhhh, so *this* is Maïne? I’d only heard stories, but she really does exist, huh. I guess she’s not made up after all.”

“She’s supposedly been here for a few days, but this is the first we’re seeing her, isn’t it? Maïne, your mouth’s just flapping, you know?”

“*She really does exist*,” he says, like I’m some kind of rare monster with a low spawn rate, or some mythical beast?!

“You two, isn’t it about time to go? Let’s head downstairs. Give Maïne a little space.”

The one who reached out to save me from being crushed was Freida. Today, she really is a goddess.

“Yes, yes,” I say, slowly trying to back away. “It would be really bad if you were late, so it would be best for you to get going, you know?”

One of the brothers firmly grabs my right arm, and the other catches my left hand.

“Let’s go together, Maïne. Come celebrate Freida’s baptism with us.”

“Ah, no, I was just going to stay here and...”

“You’re a guest of the family, it shouldn’t be a problem if you come out with us.”

“Right, right! Celebrations are more fun when there’s lots of people, after all.”

I, both arms firmly captured, shake my head frantically, but this overbearingly pushy family doesn’t hear a word of my complaints.

Is this genetic?! Does the guild leader’s family have a doesn’t-listen-to-people gene?!

Out of all of the people here smilingly watching on as my wishes are completely ignored, Freida is the only one who sighs and scolds her brothers.

“You two, if she gets sick again because you push her around too much, I’ll get scolded too, you know? Maïne has the same devouring fever I do, please don’t make her do too much. Her family’s coming to get her this afternoon, but if her fever comes back or she faints then that’ll be a problem.”

“But, we finally get to meet her. We just want to make friends, right?”

“She’s still not feeling well, so we’ve decided that she’s going to stay in this room and watch the ceremony from the windows here instead. She can’t go outside. I’m sure she wants to go outside, but...”

It seems that she’s evoking images of herself, not able to go outside because nobody knows when she might collapse from the devouring, enviously watching the world pass by her window. Her older brothers instantly look much more serious, and they let go of my arms.

“Now, everyone,” says Jutte. “The bell is about to ring. The young mistress must go outside to make her debut.”

At her word, the rest of the family gathers up around Freida, then quickly bustles off, leaving me with the impression that I just watched the passing of a hurricane. It looks like it really was the right decision to not have breakfast with them. If they kept firing questions off at me with that much force, jerking me around like that, I’d definitely pass out for days afterward.

“Miss Maïne,” asks Jutte, “are you feeling alright? They aren’t bad people, but they can sometimes come on a little strong.”

That wasn’t a little!

I keep my retort to myself, and instead move over to the window. Despite the fact that there’s a fire burning in the hearth, it’s still chilly near the window. Jutte brings me a shawl, which I wrap around myself, and I look down out of the window.

It’s very sunny outside, but the occasional glitter of a falling snowflake and the fog my breath leaves on the windowpane shows just how bitterly cold it is outside.

Across from the window, I can see that Freida has already left the house and is now being admired by the neighbors, standing out like a queen amongst peasants. Surrounded by her family, she wears the happiest smile she’s ever had.

From where I watch, amongst the few decorations that the children are wearing, the hairpins I made stand out conspicuously. I understand now just how Freida could have noticed Tuuli’s hairpins from her window here.

Tuuli must have stood out just like this, huh. She was so cute that everyone must have

been talking about her, huh.

As I look down at Freida's baptismal ceremony, all I can think about it Tuuli's ceremony, how my father had a meeting he really didn't want to go to, how my mother looked as she smiled, wearing her only good dress, and so on, and so on. Somehow, I really want to see my family again.

"Miss Maïne," says Jutte, "you look a little pale, is something wrong?"

"When I see how happy Freida is down there with her family, I think about how I want to be with my family too. They're not coming until the afternoon, though..."



As soon as the noonday bell rings, my family arrives to pick me up, as if they were lying in wait outside. My father's affection, as overbearing as it ordinarily is, warms my heart.

"Maïne, were you lonely? Daddy was so lonely!"

"A little, yeah. I was a little bit lonely."

Freida's family invited us to have lunch with them, but my mother politely told them that she couldn't possibly ask them to do more than they already had, and I struck the decisive blow by nagging her about wanting to eat her home cooking after so long, so we wound up going home without any significant resistance.

"Aww, but I wanted to have a big feast too..." whines Tuuli, puffing out her cheeks.

"Sorry, Tuuli. The food at Freida's house is wonderful, but I really want to eat Mommy's cooking even more."

"Eva," chimes in my father, "your cooking really is delicious."

We head home, with me riding on the shoulders of my high-spirited father. It's only been a few days, and the home I'm returning to is poor and worn out, but I can finally breathe a sigh of relief now that I'm no longer under constant mental strain.

Freida's house was full of extravagant meals, luxurious baths, and comfortable mattresses. Even though every single thing there was fascinating, the mental strain from being there wore me out completely. Everything was so clean and easy there, but for some reason, I never found myself wishing I could live like that forever.

Ahh, at some point, I started calling this place home, huh...

It was a stay at Freida's house that made me surprised by the change in my own heart.

Chapter 53

The Beginning of Winter

The day after I breathed a sigh of relief upon coming home, I head to Benno's shop, accompanied by Lutz. Although the first sprinkle of snowflakes has started to fall, it's imperative that I both inform Benno about my recovery and give him my thanks before the snow really starts to pile up, so I'm forced to leave my house.

"Master Benno's been wondering if you'd been pressured into something, or if you'd been recruited out from under him. He's been *really* worried about you."

"Ahh, I kept praying for him to come save me, I wonder if he heard me?"

When I was trapped in Freida's house, I'd silently called for him, over and over, to come and save me. Maybe he picked it up on some strange wavelength?

As I hum thoughtfully to myself, head tilted to the side in contemplation, Lutz scowls at me with a somewhat dissatisfied expression.

"...What about me?"

"Huh?"

"Didn't you pray for me to come save you too?"

When I look at Lutz's wounded expression, I just want to leap forward and tickle him without saying anything. Thinking about that makes me smirk, entirely unintentionally, and Lutz starts pouting even harder.

"Why are you laughing?!"

"I mean, you really did come and save me, didn't you?"

"Huh?"

Lutz freezes, startled, like a deer in the headlights, and I can't help but laugh out loud.

"Lutz, didn't you tell Freida that I'd get a fever if I was too active? Thanks to that, I got to sleep soundly, so I didn't have to sit through dinner, which meant I didn't have to listen to another sales pitch and feel bad about it... you *really* saved me!"

“Heh heh, oh really?”

Lutz smiles proudly, gripping my hand a little tighter, then moves a half-step ahead of me. Maybe he thinks that if he can block a little bit of the wind that’s hitting me, there won’t be as much snow falling on my head.

“Good afternoon,” I say, upon reaching Benno’s shop.

“Ah, Maïne,” replies Mark. “I am overjoyed to see that you’re well again.”

The inside of Benno’s shop is both lively and warm. When Mark saw the two of us enter the shop, breathing little sighs of relief, he quickly came over to greet us. It seems to me that, even though the snow has started to fall, the number of people coming and going hasn’t decreased a bit, even though I’m hearing that some workshops have already closed down for the winter.

I murmur this to myself, looking around the store, and Mark smiles down at me.

“That’s because this shop still sells things during the winter,” he says.

“Oh, is that so?” I reply.

Since the days during which the snowstorms make it impossible to move around only increase as the winter goes on, I’d thought that people here lived in such a way that would make it impossible to spend money. It seems that I was wrong.

“When the noblemen are shut indoors by the snow, they have a lot of free time to spend. Their purse strings slacken a surprising amount for the sake of finding things to stave off their boredom.”

“Ah, I see, entertainment, huh...”

I can’t make a game console, but things like trumps, *karuta*, *hanafuda*, *sugoroku*, and other familiar card games start bouncing around in my head. If I have the spare time to do so, maybe it would be a good idea to try making something like that.

Lutz tugs firmly on my sleeve. “Did you just think of something?”

“Something that would really be better if we had paper.”

It’s possible that I could make card games work with very thin, wooden cards. However, that would require the skill to slice wood very thinly, as well as cut them to approximately the same thickness and size. It would be relatively simple to

accomplish if I were to get someone skilled in woodworking to do it for me, but since we're operating under the premise of "I'll think of it and Lutz will make it", I at least don't want to make these until after our baptismal ceremony.

I wonder if Lutz actually can make thin sheets?

Besides, I have yet to actually see any evidence of paints in this world. Since I know dyes exist, it's not unreasonable to think that paints might too, but there's nothing in my house that could possibly be used to paint playing cards.

For something like Othello or *shogi*, though, we might be able to make it work with just ink and a board. When it comes to the most ways to play with something, though, playing cards are number one.

While I mumble to myself, deep in thought, I'm led into the office, where Benno abruptly leans in close to look at me.

"Maïne, you're all better now, right?"

"Whoa?! Y... yes," I say, blinking quickly. "I'm sorry for making you worry."

Even with my reassurances, Benno still looks at me with deep suspicion, and won't stop scrutinizing my face.

"Master Benno," says Lutz, "she's fine. She was just thinking about something, there's nothing wrong with her health."

"If you say so," he replies.

Perhaps Lutz's words finally convinced him, as he suddenly turns away, walking to a table over by the fireplace. He sits down, letting out an enormous, heavy sigh.

"Those magic tools were something that old bastard had gathered up, and he said he had to be extremely persistent in order to get that many of them, so I had to gamble on whether or not he'd actually let you use one of them, but..."

"Ah, he tried to force me to work at his shop. If I hadn't had enough money to pay him, he'd have wanted me to transfer over to his shop, you know, to pay off the debt?"

"Debt... well, that's to be expected. But, it looks like you had the money?"

He grins a wide, triumphant grin. I nod at him, laying out the facts of the trap that the guild master and Freida had laid out for me.

“Yes, sir. For the use of the magic tool, the guild master quoted the price to you as one small gold and two large silver coins, but the actual cost was two small gold and eight large silver coins, so—”

“That old bastard!” shouts Benno, roughly scratching his head in frustration.

“I just barely had enough money to cover it, which was a relief. It looked like the two of them were not expecting me to have the necessary funds, and were quite shocked.”

As I continue explaining, Benno is momentarily taken aback, then murmurs to himself, “that’s right, I *did* increase her information fee...”

He smiles broadly. “Well, if it gave those two a shock then that’s alright with me. *However*, be careful around those two. If you keep hanging around them like you do with your complete lack of a sense of danger, they’ll gobble you right up.”

I, with my complete lack of a sense of danger, had made what I’m pretty sure was a pretty grievous mistake, but I think it should be best to tell Benno about it. However, as I start thinking about that, I find myself wanting to delay the scolding that’s inevitably coming, and can’t stop myself from picking the most roundabout way to broach the subject.

“Umm, Mister Benno. I have a question. What kind of sweets are common around here?”

“What do you mean?”

I flinch as he glances at me with his reddish-brown eyes, and start adding to my explanation.

“Well, sweet things are rare at my home, and are just things like honey and fruits, and then paru during the winter.”

“Ah, that’s right.”

“...So, y-yes. Mister Benno. This is a little off-topic, but Freida had sugar at her house. Is that particularly unusual?”

Considering that there’s no sugar for use in cooking around my house, I think that it would likely be something that would have only spread amongst the upper classes. Even still, I want to ask someone who knows things about its distribution, if possible, hopefully be told that it’s something that’s actually pretty common for the majority of the town and it’s just that my family is too poor to buy it, or something like that.

Of course, there's no chance that the answer will actually match my fervent desire.

"Hm, it's rather unusual around here. It's only recently started to be imported from foreign countries, and it's gathered quite a lot of popularity in the royal capital and amongst the nobility, but... wait. *You*. Did you do something again?!"

Seeing as how I'm already guilty of so many things, Benno almost immediately notices my scheme. His eyebrows go straight up.

"Um, I made a kind of sweet called '*pound cake*', and they seemed to really latch onto it..."

"Oh, that!" says Lutz. "That was *super* tasty. It was really moist, and it melted in my mouth, and it was the first time I had something sweet like... wait, *Maine*!"

Although sugar has started circulating amongst the nobility, it seems that there aren't enough kinds of sweets being made to consider this place as having anything of a pastry cuisine. A pound cake is a very simple, orthodox cake, but there's no mistake: I overdid it.

The two of them glare at me, and I am, as expected, filled with the sense that I've done something terrible.

"Why in the *world* would you, confronted by carnivorous animals, stick your head out of the bushes like that?! Isn't it obvious that you'd be devoured in an instant!"

If pound cake has gotten him so enraged, then I can take some small comfort in having not instead made sponge cake or shortcake. Sure, that's because I was nervous about the scales and that wood-fired stove, but, ultimately, that saved me.

"I mean," I say, "I'd promised Freida that I'd make sweets with her, and I was trying to think of a way that I could show her my thanks—"

"If you wanted to thank her, your money is good enough!"

What Benno is saying lines up nearly with what Freida had said to me earlier. To merchants here, once you've completed your transaction, anything beyond that is unnecessary.

"Urgh, Freida said that to me too."

“Again?! What do you do when the person you’re negotiating tells you these things? Didn’t I already tell you to make sure if your opponent is actually okay losing?”

Noooooo! I have no learning ability at all. Although, isn’t it only natural to want to give thanks to someone who just saved your life?

“I just wanted to thank her for saving my life...”

“So, in other words, the fact that her old bastard of a grandfather just deceived you fell right out of your empty head, did it?”

“Ngh...”

I’m at a loss for words after that. I can’t deny that, in the end, since I had the money, they saved my life. However, if I hadn’t had enough, and I’d been forcefully pulled away from Benno’s shop to work at the guild master’s, I’m sure my feelings would have been more complicated.

“...Seriously, since you have the devouring, they can’t really bank on having you for any real length of time, so they’ve been going easy on you. If they were serious, you’d have been acquired long before you even noticed it. Don’t do anything to explicitly get yourself caught.”

Ah, I see, I think I understand a little more clearly now. I’d been thinking that these traps they were spreading out to try to recruit me were a little too easy. It seems that they’ve only just been poking at me, since I’m someone who’ll either get crushed by the devouring or have to enter into a contract with a nobleman.

“Umm, when you say they’d acquire me before I noticed it, what would that look like?”

“The simplest thing for them would be to approach your parents and lay the groundwork there. There’s no way that they’d refuse someone offering to become your patron. They’d attack you from there, after your baptism, sending over an associate to say they’ll take care of you from now on, and without you even knowing about it you’ll suddenly be engaged to their son. The only reason they haven’t done that yet is because they don’t know whether or not they’ll still have you after a year.”

“That’s, that’s terrifying!”

I tremble, goosebumps covering my arms. Benno looks at me in amazement.

“You finally got it? Looks like there’s a limit to your lack of fear... So, you just delivered them this dessert?”

I tilt my head to the side, not really understanding the meaning of his question, then explain how Freida and I made it together.

“No, I don’t have the physical strength in order to be able to make sweets, so I explained the process to Freida’s household chef and she helped us make it. They had a lot of white flour, and sugar, and even a wood oven in their house, it was amazing!”

“Yes, amazing, amazing! So, in other words, you gave them the entire recipe...”

Benno has his head in his hands, a sight that makes me rather anxious. I had no idea whatsoever that a cake I made just to show my thanks could make such enormous waves.

“Er, did I do something wrong?”

“You gave away something that could be sold to the nobility for free. You’re an idiot, aren’t you?”

To be perfectly honest, I have no idea what gets sold to the nobility and what goes to the working class. I get that a cake recipe is something that’s worth some money, though. I should be more careful in the future.

“Urgh... So if that’s the case, then would it be okay if I taught a chef here how to make it so we can sell it here too? There’s no way they could have started selling it by now...”

“Acquiring sugar is still difficult.”

Benno gives me a clearly disgusted look when I suggest that everything might be okay if we could get it to market first. Giving me that look doesn’t help the problem, though. Acquiring sugar isn’t *my* domain. That’s Benno’s job, the man who does business far and wide.

“Well, I guess I’d better give up for now, then. If you can find a cook with easy access to sugar and an oven, I’ll give you the recipe to ‘*pound cake*’ for free!”

“...From the way you’re talking, it sounds like there’s more.”

Benno, having caught on immediately, looks at me, but all I’ve got are recipes that you can’t make work without any sugar. Even if I were to tell him, there wouldn’t be any meaning to it. I, having recently been taught how recipes for sweets could be quite valuable, puff up my chest and turn my head away towards the door.

"Any more will cost you," I say.

"Show *them* that stubbornness!"

"...I'll do my best," I say, slumping dejectedly.

I am not at all used to having things I've done out of good will turned into raw calculation, but since this is what the world of merchants is like, I have no choice but to get used to it.

"Is that all you had to tell me?"

"Ah, no. This is much more personal information, but I'm unable to leave my house in the winter, and I won't be able to come to the shop until spring. Please don't worry about me."

Benno and Mark, who've become overprotective after I collapsed right in front of them, are both here. Although I'm sure that even if I didn't come to the shop there wouldn't be any problems with managing the store, but it would be bad for me to make them worry about my health again, so I think I need to make this statement.

"Unable to leave your house, you say?"

"If I do, I'll be stuck in bed again."

"Hmm? Didn't you say you'd be helping Otto, though?"

It seems that Benno somehow got the idea that I'd be going to the gates frequently during the winter, but that's not quite right. There's no way my family would let me do something *that* reckless.

"Ummm, only on clear days, when my health is good, and my father is working either the morning or the day shift. I don't think that'll be more than ten times over the course of the winter."

"...Will you really be able to hold down a job after your baptism?" he asks.

"That's something I worry about every day," I reply.

Benno, deeply concerned, may have asked me that question, but I'm really the one with questions for him. Is there work that I can actually do?

"Well, it's good that you're thinking about it so hard. So then, how are you planning to deliver your winter handiwork? As the spring baptismal ceremony starts coming around, it would be a big help to have some stock here at the shop."

We'd previously discussed delivering our merchandise in full when spring came around, but it seems like that won't be in time for the spring baptismal ceremony. It also appears that he doesn't have much stock left from what we rushed to create for the winter ceremony.

Lutz cheerfully raises his hand. "I can bring them," he says, "depending on the weather. Clear days are for picking paru, so I can come to the shop on cloudy days, I guess?" "Ahh, paru, huh... I miss it. Paru juice is such a treat for children."

Benno smiles wistfully. Perhaps even Benno used to go picking paru back in the day? I smirk, suddenly imagining Benno splitting his spoils of war with Corinna. Lutz, sitting next to me, thinks about gathering paru for a moment, then gets a sly grin.

"I'm definitely going to eat parucakes this year too," he says. "...Parucakes?" says Benno, dubiously. "What might those be?"

I start thinking of what the world would be like if the recipe for parucakes got out, then suddenly break into a cold sweat.

"Ahh, Lutz. How about we keep that recipe a secret, alright? Otherwise we won't be able to get any paru anymore."

The dried-up pomace left over after squeezing all the juice out of a paru isn't something that humans can eat. It's animal food. People, believing that, bring those rinds to Lutz's family, trading lots of it in exchange for fresh eggs. However, if word of its usefulness were to spread, then paru pomace would likely be very valuable. In that case, I'd have caused a huge hassle for everyone expecting to be able to use it to feed their livestock.

"Okay. It'll just be ours to enjoy, then!" "Yeah, let's leave it just between us."

When it comes time to head home from Benno's, snow has started to pile up, bit by bit, on the sides of the road. I look upon the signs that a full-blown can't-leave-the-house winter has finally started, and breathe a small sigh.

"Looks like the days I can't go outside have started, huh." "...Yeah, you're right."

Lutz nods slightly, looking down at the snow accumulating on the road. Karla, his mother, had told me that the mood around the house wasn't great. Lutz, the reason behind it, must be feeling that pressure even more. Winter, when everyone's locked inside their homes, must be an especially harsh season for him.

"Hey, Lutz. Come over to my house every few days, okay? Bring your studying stuff and any pins you've got finished."

The only thing I can offer him is a little room to breathe. Since it looks like Lutz's family treats him harshly every day, and he can't leave his house without good reason, it seems like it would be good for him to use his discretion about how many pins he should bring at a time.

Lutz's expression opens up a little at my suggestion. "Yeah, I'll do that," he says. "Thanks."



As the days of snowstorms continue, fewer and fewer people walk the roads. To endure the bitter cold, people refrain from going outdoors, passing the time away inside their homes.

Since my father's a soldier at the gates, even though it's wintertime he can't take a vacation from work, just like last year. Even during snowstorms he still has to work, so it's rare for him to be home.

At home, Tuuli works diligently on making hairpins whenever she has time. Since she knows for sure that this will bring in money, she works even more seriously at this than she did with weaving baskets last year. My mother, still showing interest in our winter handiwork, has to put making clothes for the family her higher priority. Since my baptismal ceremony is this year, she said, making me a good dress is her first task.

"Altering Tuuli's dress from last year won't work, now, will it?"

Tuuli, over the last year, grew even more. By summer, her dress had already started getting a bit tight. As such, she'd barely worn it. Altering it to fit me, though, wouldn't actually save all that much labor, it seems?

"Your sizes are way too different, so altering this would be a huge task!"

My mother, troubled, smiles wryly as she says this. Ordinarily, nice dresses aren't something you have to make a lot of. If there's sisters in the family, it's especially common for there to be hand-me-downs. However, Tuuli and I are very different sizes. When Tuuli was just turning seven in time for her baptism, she already looked like she was about eight or nine. I, however, still look like I'm four or five. Wearing the same clothing as her is, frankly, impossible.

When I try it on, standing in the light of the stove, it drapes loosely off my shoulders and down my sides, the knee-length skirt hanging around my ankles.

"Hmm..." I say. "Although, if we take the hem and take it in like this we could hide the length, and then if we pleat it like this it would be cute, I think, wouldn't it? Then how about we decorate the areas around the stitches with little flowers?"

"Maïne, that's not just alteration," laughs Tuuli as I stand there holding my hem in a pleat. "That sounds really extravagant!"

It seems like they're saying that since our sizes are so different, they're going to alter the dress by undoing all the stitching, cutting it down to my size, and resew it entirely. It seems my suggestion of hemming it up to hide the actual length of it is practically heresy.

I'm pretty sure this is the part where I'd rather not get scolded for doing something unnecessary.

"Oh, is it? If it's too showy, then I guess we should skip that. I guess I was just thinking that if we just took it in like this, then when I start getting bigger we could just let it back out again..."

The only people who can use extra cloth like this are the kinds of people with lifestyles where they can afford it. Nobody who isn't rich wears clothing with pleats in it, nor can they afford to add too many decorations, either. That's why Tuuli's dress had been made exactly to her size. Even if we're only adding pleats to make it fit me, it'll still wind up standing out a lot.

My mother, who has kept her mouth shut during this, seems to have come alive with a strange eagerness. She grabs me firmly by the shoulders, smiling broadly.

"...Let's try doing it like you say, Maïne. If it doesn't work, we can always do it the

regular way. Right?"

Ah. Crap. I got my mother fired up. She's... not going to stop, even if I tell her the regular way's just fine, is she? I'm already going to be way busier than I was last year, between making my own hairpins, tutoring Lutz, and cooking, though.

Of course, there's nowhere for me to run away from my overeager mother. At some point, while standing in front of the stove, wearing nothing but that nice summer dress, and holding it up while my mother pins it together, I, thanks to my frailty, catch a cold.

Achoo!

Chapter 54

Finishing My Dress and Hairpins

After two days, my fever broke.

Getting my new dress altered might be very risky. If things keep going like this, I'm going to get sick again before we can actually finish fitting it. Contemplating this, I get out of bed, and go looking for my mother.

The kitchen table has been pulled close to the stove, and sitting at it are my mother and Tuuli, diligently working on their handiwork. It seems that since they couldn't work on my dress while I was sick, they've instead been working hard on these instead.

"Oh, Maïne," says my mother. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah," I reply.

"So, how about we get back to working on your dress?"

She tidies up her handiwork, looking just a little regretful, and starts bringing out the dress.

"Where's Daddy? Morning watch?"

"He's on the day watch, but since it's snowing so hard he left already."

Soldiers are used to shovel the main roads. While they are given extra money as special compensation for their work, my father constantly grumbles (when he's drinking) about how the pay doesn't come close to covering the back-breaking manual labor.

"Now then, Maïne," she says, unfolding my dress and holding it out for me. "Put this on, please."

I look at it, with its short sleeves and thin fabric, and my face twitches. If I do as she says, then even if I'm standing right in front of the stove I'm going to catch another fever.

“Mommy, could I keep a long-sleeve shirt on? Just one’s okay.”

“Your dress isn’t going to fit perfectly, you know?”

“That’s okay. I’ll get bigger by summertime.”

My mother puts a hand to her face as she tilts her head to the side, an extremely dubious expression on her face. She looks me over, as if considering her options, then lets out a sigh.

“...That would be nice, wouldn’t it?”

At least say something like “I know you will,” *Mother!*

I, not wanting my fever to come back again, put on a long-sleeved shirt, then put my dress on over that, before surrendering myself to the alterations process.

“So,” I say, “the biggest size difference is in the shoulders. How about this?”

Just like my mother said, when I put on Tuuli’s dress the shoulders are so loose that it’s unsightly. So, I’ve tightly gathered up the extra width, draping it around my shoulders and making it into an off-the-shoulder dress.

“It’ll fall off your shoulders like that, you know?”

“Yeah, so we should add shoulder straps near my neck, made out of some kind of cloth or cord. If there’s leftover cloth from when this dress was made, then that would be great. If not, maybe some blue cloth? Something that would match the sash or the embroidery.”

“We have some scraps left. It should be enough for shoulder straps, if that’s all we need.”

My mother rummages about in her cloth bin, then brings back some scraps. She rolls them up into cords, then sews them on as straps. With that, a dress that was so loose that it might fall off my shoulders has turned into an off-the-shoulder dress, designed with straps like a camisole.

“Ahh, it won’t fall off like this.”

My mother gives a satisfied nod. Then, she scowls, pointing at my side.

“Maïne, no matter how I look at it, that’s unsightly. What should we do?”

With the cloth drawn tight around my shoulders, all the loose material has gathered under my armpits. I pinch at it, my head tilted to the side.

“Well, since I’m going to be wearing a wide sash on my waist, it’s not a problem to have a little bit of extra material on the side, is it?”

“It is. It’s unsightly!”

“Oh, is it? Then, how about we sew some proper pleats into it? It would take some time, but it would make it cute, right?”

I tuck the so-called unsightly cloth away into neat folds, demonstrating how to pull it back from my chest and towards my sides in three tacks. This kind of delicate sewing is very tedious, but it would get rid of the extra fabric and add decoration around my chest.

My mother hums thoughtfully to herself. “...You’re right. That sounds good, then.” She sticks out her hand. “I won’t be able to sew that if you don’t take it off first, though.”

I take off my dress and hand it to my mother. I immediately put on as many layers as I can, before breathing a sigh of relief. That was *really* cold. I think I’ll have another fever by the time we’re finished.

“You’re lucky, Maïne,” says Tuuli, as she watches my mother sewing tacks into the dress. “That’s going to be such a gorgeous dress.” She sighs enviously.

Sure, the dress is going to have a lot of loose fluttery bits and is going to look kind of extravagant, but that’s only due to the difference between our physiques. For the average younger sister, this kind of heavy alteration that takes up a ton of her mother’s time isn’t needed.

“...It’s because our sizes are so different,” I say. “But starting from scratch is even more work, so this kind of alteration is all we can do. This dress was originally made for you, you know? You get all the new clothes. All I get are your hand-me-downs, you know?”
“Ah, right...”

It is the fate of those poor children born later than their siblings to never wear new clothing. (Even Tuuli, though, gets a lot of her clothes from the neighbors, so she doesn’t get to wear brand-new things very often, but still.)

“While Mommy’s sewing, I guess I should work on my hairpin, too.”

Since it’ll be some time before my mother is done sewing in the tacks, I get to work on sewing my own hairpin. Since I’m finally starting work on it after all this time, I want to make something a little different than the ones we’re making to sell.

“Mommy, since I’m making a hairpin for myself, can I use our thread?”

“Since we don’t have to make you a new dress, you can use enough for a hairpin, sure.”

“Thanks!”

Last year, nobody really knew what I was talking about when I wanted to make hairpins, so getting thread was a difficult process, but this year they know what I actually want to do, so I was able to get my hands on some without a fight. Filled with a fresh appreciation of the importance of mutual understanding, I pick up some undyed thread.

“I think it went like... this...”

I pick up my needles and, digging through my memories, start knitting a round flower, like a lily-of-the-valley. Tuuli, having finished up a hairpin of her own, comes to check out what I’m working on.

“Maïne, what’s that? That’s kinda different from the flowers we did for Freida or for our handiwork, isn’t it?”

“This is going to be the hairpin that I’ll wear for my baptism,” I reply.

“You’re finally getting to work on your own hairpin, don’t you want it to look like Freida’s? Those were so wonderful, too...”

Tuuli, who had been quite taken with the roses we made for Freida, rolls the lily-of-the-valley between her fingertips, lips tapered in a frown.

“I’m using a different quality of thread, so I don’t think it would turn out the same.”

I remember the intricate, glossy red roses we made for Freida, then sigh lightly. Even if I were to use the same pattern, they wouldn’t turn out the same in the end.

As I ponder this, Tuuli grips her needles firmly. “If it’s okay that they’re not the same, then I’ll make them! You made a hairpin for me, so I want to make a hairpin for you too.”

“Thanks, Tuuli. So, could you please make a flower like one of the big ones we made for Freida, except could you use this thread and make it a bit bigger?”

Tuuli is delighted when I ask her to make the rose part of the hairpin. Since that rose is the largest, most eye-catching part, leaving it to Tuuli, who is more skilled than I, would make a much prettier result.

“Tuuli, do you remember how to make it?”

“I don’t have a problem with remembering things. Leave it to me!”

...I’m sorry you have such a forgetful little sister.

Having left Tuuli to work on the rose, I start diligently working on the smaller flowers. No matter how hard I’m working, though, my rate of output isn’t very quick, so by the time I’ve finished my third flower my mother has finished sewing in the tacks.

“Maïne, come try this on.”

“Kaaay!”

I strip back down to one layer, then pull the dress on. It’s turned into an off-the-shoulder, pleated, one-piece dress. Because of the pleats, it seems to naturally flutter as it hangs.

“Mommy, could you get the sash? I want to try it on.”

“Good idea,” she replies.

I tighten the wide sash around my waist, causing the skirt to gently flare out, almost like a balloon.

“I wasn’t too sure about this while I was still sewing, but now that I can see it on you, it’s really cute.”

“Because *I’m* cute, right?”

“Because *I’m* good.”

Our eyes meet, and we burst into snickers.

She grabs me by the shoulders and spins me around. “Next is the hem. It’s still cute as it is, but it’s much too long.”

The dress, knee-length on Tuuli, comes down to my ankles. I have no idea who decided this, but around here girls under ten years of age wear knee-length skirts. Incidentally, there don't seem to be any miniskirts here, although if I had to say, since one- and two-year-olds have such short legs, knee-length on them is kind of like a mini-skirt.

Also, and this is really bothersome, not only is it a problem if the skirt is too short, it's bad for it to be too long, too. Shin-length dresses are worn between ages ten and fifteen. When a woman grows up, it seems like it's most desirable for a woman to wear dresses so long you can't even see her ankles. The only women who can get away with wearing floor-length skirts like that, though, are ones who don't have to work. The dresses worn by working women, such as my mother, come down to the ankles.

"How might we go about pinning this up like we did the shoulders, I wonder?" ponders my mother.

"Maybe take it up twice in the back and twice in the front, I think... but, Mommy, what do you think?"

"Hmm, that actually sounds perfect."

If we bring it up to knee-length in four places, we can make it look like a balloon curtain.

After we sew everything into place, we use miniature flowers like the ones on my new hairpin to conceal the extra stitching. Then, after arranging the folds of the skirt so that the embroidery on the hem is visible, my new dress is complete.

"That looks like a rich girl's dress."

"...Yeah."

The dress has been pleated, given loose, fluttery sleeves, and puffed out like a balloon. This dress, which uses plenty of cloth for purely decorative purpose, is clearly not a poor girl's dress, no matter how you look at it. All we wanted to do was take the unfashionably loose bits and hide them away with some clever sewing, but instead we wound up with a design that would be rare even in upper-class households. This is a dress that it quite clearly beyond our family's station.

"...Maybe we should have just remade it?"

"If I had the time to do that, then I really would like to, but... this is, hm, really conspicuous, you know?"

Tuuli, having overheard us, shrugs lightly, pointing at the half-finished hairpin she was working on.

“It’s too late for that, right? Just the hairpin alone is really conspicuous already, so it’s not like it can get worse.”

Amongst all the other girls, who merely had things woven into their hair, Tuuli and her hairpin had stood out from the crowd enough to catch Freida’s eyes. Since I’ve already decided that I’m going to be wearing a brand new hairpin, I’m going to be extremely conspicuous anyway, so wearing a showy dress isn’t going to get me any more attention than I already will.

Freida had even said that drawing attention to myself would turn me into a walking advertisement for my hairpins. So, I stiffen my resolve even more.

“We worked so hard already, and it’s cute, and I don’t care if I stand out. I’m going like this!”

My very health was the sacrifice necessary to create this dress. Plus, unlike the miniskirt-length maid dress I was forced to wear at my high-school cultural festival¹, this is a very reserved sort of design, so since it’s only knee-length there’s no need for me to be embarrassed by it at all.

“Well, Maïne, if you say so, then that’s fine with me. Now, what are you doing for your hairpin?”

“Since Tuuli’s working on this big flower for me, I’m making at least ten more little flowers like these.”

“I’ll help you, too. It’s your celebratory gift, after all.”

Chuckling to herself, my mother takes out her crocheting needles from her sewing box.

“Thanks, Mommy. So, if it’s a gift, then can we use the blue and the light blue thread too? Enough for three flowers each.”

“Well, now, if you insist.”

“Yay!”

We all get to our tiny, detailed task of making the hairpin. The three of us make short work of it. We end up with three large, white roses, three small blue flowers, three

small light-blue flowers, and fifteen small white flowers. In the span of a single day, we've finished all of the parts.

"How are you going to decorate this?" asks my mother.

"Aren't there too many small flowers?" asks Tuuli.

"You'll see in a bit!" I say, with a grin. "I'm going to make this part myself. Don't look!"

Even though I said that, though, there isn't a single place in this house that I can actually work without being seen. The two of them pretend not to look, but I'm fully aware that they keep surreptitiously glancing over at me, full of curious questions but, since they are of course not looking at me, keeping their mouths shut. It's actually kind of funny.



"I'm home!" says my father as he walks through the door. "Ahh, I'm exhausted again. All I got to do today was shovel snow and babysit drunk people."

It seems like he'd tried to brush the snow off of himself before coming in, but he still tracked a bit of it on. While Tuuli and I quickly work to sweep it up, I glance up at my father.

"Daddy, did you finish the hairpin for my baptismal ceremony?"

"Sure, wait just a bit!"

My father smiles proudly as he brings out from the storeroom out a long pin that has been carefully carved straight and polished. When I realize just how much effort it must have taken to smooth this down so perfectly, my jaw drops.

"What do you think?"

"It's beautiful. It moves so smoothly through my hair, and doesn't get caught in anything at all. Daddy, thank you!"

I take the small scrap of cloth that I've attached the three large white flowers to and sew it through the hole at the end of the pin. Then, I run my needle through that cloth, and start threading the small flowers onto it in clusters with small gaps between each flower, so that they can hang down, swaying freely, like a spray of wisteria.

From the roses, the closest of the small flowers are the three blue ones, then the three

light blue ones, and then five of the white ones. To add gradation, I add the remaining seven flowers in two more strands, giving it three in total. I'd made this based on the image of a pin that I'd worn with my *yukata* back in my Urano days, but this has turned out even better than I'd expected. This is definitely a pin to wear on an excellent day.

"Whoa, that's so cute, the way it sways like that!" enthuses Tuuli. "Try it on, Maïne!" "After all that work, you should wear it with your dress, too," says my father. "Your daddy's the only one who hasn't seen it yet!" "That's right," adds my mother. "I'd like to see you in it too, and not over a long-sleeved shirt like before. Let's see you wear it properly."

Pressured by my family, I change into my new dress. Then, I slide my new hairpin into my hair, next to the chopstick I'm still wearing.

"Whoa, Maïne," says my father. "This is amazing! Everyone's going to think you're some kind of princess. The way you look right now is way more elaborate and way cuter than you looked when you were wearing Freida's outfit. You'd never be able to tell just by looking at you that this was Tuuli's dress, just modified to fit you. Now *that's* my Eva!"

My father praises me while also extolling the virtues of his wife's superior sewing skills, looking very moved. My mother smiles wryly at him, though, and finds a way to object.

"It's not fair for you to compare it to Freida's dress. The quality is so different! But, compared to just normal alterations, this *has* turned into something quite extravagantly cute, hasn't it! Working with so much extra cloth is really a whole different world of sewing."

"If the quality were the same, though, then I'd really be able to say that your work is the best!"

"Oh my, Gunther!"

The two of them are lost entirely in their own world, now. Watching the two of them banter back and forth, *flirting*, is actually kind of painful to watch. I never actually had much of this kind of social interaction in my Urano days, so watching it unfold before my eyes is something I definitely want to not have to do.

I want to escape, but how?

As I start drifting away into feelings that I've been completely left behind, Tuuli, who had been standing behind me and looking closely at my hairpin, steps back into my field of view, snapping me out of it.

"Yep, cute! It's really cute, Maïne! Your dress is showy and cute, but this hairpin is really good! The slow swaying of the flowers draws the eye, and since your hair is such a dark, night-sky blue, the white flowers really stand out!"

"Oh, really?"

Perfect, Tuuli. You're my angel.

Latching onto her life-saving voice, I turn around so that I don't have to see my parents. Once their flirty expressions have disappeared from my field of view, I let out a little sigh of relief.

"When we were working I was thinking to myself, 'wow, isn't this going to be too big?', but now that you're wearing it, it's no problem at all."

"Your hair is really puffy and wavy, but mine is really straight and doesn't have any volume, so if I didn't make a big, showy hairpin, it wouldn't look great if you compared it to my dress."

"Oh, yeah, I see..."

We've only been talking for a few minutes, but already my thin summer dress is doing nothing to stop me from shivering in the winter's fierce cold. Goosebumps stand up along my entire body, and an unpleasant chill starts racing down my spine.

"A... achoo!"

Startled by my sneeze, my mother pushes my father aside and comes over to me.

"Maïne, we've seen enough of your dress already, go get changed and get to bed at once. You'll get feverish again!"

"Ah... achoo! Mommy, I think you were a little late. My spine feels all cold and shivery, and my neck is starting to feel a little warm..."

I am very quickly changed into my pajamas and hustled towards bed, but I'm already certain that my fever's begun to rise again. I crawl into my prickly straw bed, then let out a long sigh.

Well, I guess I was already sure that I'd get another fever, so it's not like this is something dramatically unexpected. I wonder, though, is my body *ever* going to get any stronger?

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Japanese schools put on yearly cultural festivals called bunkasai, in which students show off their creative and artistic achievements. These displays can include concerts, art galleries, or even maid cafes such as what is being alluded to here.

Chapter 55

Lutz's Tutor

As we work on our hairpin handicrafts, someone knocks on our front door. Tuuli and I exchange glances, then she gets up to see what's going on.

"Yes, who is it?"

"It's me, Lutz. I've brought some pins with me."

"Alright, let me open up for you."

Tuuli unlocks the door, and it creaks open, letting in a gust of fresh, freezing air. Lutz walks in, snow still clinging to him.

"Whoaaa, it looks cold out there," I say.

"Is it snowing hard?" asks Tuuli.

"The road to the well was completely covered, but it isn't that bad out right now," says Lutz.

As we talk, all the snow falls off of him, landing where he stands, just inside the entranceway.

"Here, some pins. Each of my brothers made three of them, so there's nine here."

He sets the pin parts of our hairpins out on the table. As he lines them up in a row, Tuuli stands up and goes to fetch the decorations that we've finished so far.

"Ah, so, how about we finish putting together the hairpins we can?" says my mother. "If we do that, though, we're missing a few pins, you know?"

It looks like while I was out sick, she and my mother managed to finish quite a few decorations. I glance at the decorations she lines up on the table, and pose a question to Lutz.

"We've finished twelve decorations. You've brought nine pins with you. How many pins are we short by?"

“Oh? Umm... three.”

“That’s right! Good job. You’ve been studying hard!” Glancing down, I notice that he has a bag in one hand, carrying his slate and his calculator. “Mommy, Tuuli, can I leave you to work on the hairpins? I’m going to go help Lutz study.”

Tuuli blinks incredulously, tilting her head to one side. “I heard that you go do calculations at the gates, but do you really know how to teach it?”

“Um, yeah, I think I can teach basic reading and math.”

I pout, sullenly, at how little faith my sister seems to have in me. Lutz, though, beams broadly.

“Maïne’s really amazing at reading and math! Well, she’s also really amazingly weak, too.”

You could have stopped after the first sentence, *Lutz*.

Even though I shoot him a nasty glare, my mother and Tuuli got a good laugh out of it, so it doesn’t make a difference.

Lutz starts pulling out his slate and some slate pencils from his bag, so I run to the bedroom to go get my own things. From the wooden box by my bed, I pull out my soot pencils and the little memo book that I managed to assemble from the usable parts of our slightly-failed paper prototypes.

I’ve been thinking that I could work on my book-making project under the pretense of helping Lutz study. Ordinarily, when my mother and Tuuli are working diligently on their handicrafts, it feels really awkward to sit next to them and play around with this by myself. If I’m doing it while teaching Lutz, though, then the both of us are writing on things, so I don’t think it would look too out of place.

Now then, let’s get back to working on this book!

Since I’ve worked on this whenever I’ve been able to find bits of free time, I’ve gotten just a little bit of work done on writing down my mother’s bedtime stories, but it’s still not fleshed-out enough for me to really be able to call this little memo pad a proper book.

With my memo book, soot pencils, slate, and slate pencils held in my arms, I cheerfully start heading back to the kitchen. Before I get there, though, I hear my mother speak.

“Lutz, don’t Karla and the rest of your family not like the idea of you becoming a merchant? Are you sure you’re okay with that?”

The sudden, serious question makes me stop dead in my tracks, my breath caught in my throat. Taking care to silence my footsteps, I slowly continue back into the kitchen.

Tuuli, seated next to my mother, is rigid and unmoving. Across from her sits Lutz, looking back at her with a stiff expression. As I sit down next to Lutz, my mother looks between the two of us, sighing, then opens her mouth to speak.

“I was wondering, you know, if Maïne was the reason you’ve been saying that you want to be a merchant. You’re such a kind boy, so I thought that perhaps Maïne said that she wanted to be one, and you’re following along to look after her.”

“No way!” he immediately objects. “I said I wanted to be a merchant, and Maïne got me an introduction. She’s the one getting dragged along, not me.”

Lutz was thinking that he wanted to become a trader, then he listened to what Otto had to say, learned about what citizenship meant, and decided he wanted to be a merchant instead. I honestly didn’t have much to do with that decision-making process at all.

My mother nods slightly, quietly staring at him. “I see. You’re the one who wants to be a merchant. But, if Maïne goes to the same apprenticeship as you do, then you’ll continue to look after her like you’re doing now, won’t you? If you’re spending time on her, then you’re not going to do a very good job at your actual job as an apprentice. You’re going to do sloppy work if you’re preoccupied with her all the time.”

I think my mother’s warning hit Lutz right in the heart. Sitting next to him, I can tell that this unexpected revelation has caused his breath to catch in his throat. Her warning struck close to home for me, too. She’s not at all wrong.

While I worriedly grind my teeth, Lutz lifts his head determinedly to look at my mother.

“...I want to become a merchant, no matter what. Since I have Maïne here with me, I think that’s actually possible. So, while I do want to be as much help to her as I can, it’s not like I’m trying to become a merchant for her sake.”

That's right, Lutz has his own dreams, and being a merchant would put him in a much better place to let him do what he wants to do than being a craftsman would. Talking with Benno and Mark has only made him more sure of this. He may be doing everything with me, but there's no way he's becoming a merchant solely for my sake. This is the fastest way for him to get where he wants to go.

"Then, if Maïne can't be there with you—say, if she's too weak and has to quit her job—would you still continue trying to be a merchant?"

Lutz clenches his fists together tightly on top of the table, looking steadily into my mother's eyes. "Yes," he says, nodding slowly. "Of course I would. My mom and dad are telling me to stop and just be a craftsman, but I'm not going to give up now that I've made so much progress. Even if Maïne tells me to stop now, I'm still going to do it." "I see," she replies. "...Well, that's good then! All I've heard is what Karla's been telling me, so I've been a bit concerned. Thanks for talking with me about this, Lutz."

To Karla, it probably looks like I'm making Lutz follow along behind me. That isn't *entirely* false, given how visible my condition is, but it seems like she barely even half-listens to what Lutz says and is punishing him for the warped view of his goals that she thinks he has.

And then, even though she told him to stop, he refused...

I actually kind of want to know just what it was that Karla said to my mother, but I have a feeling she wouldn't tell me if I asked. I'm pretty sure she'd just say that if I wanted to know so badly, I should go ask her myself.

"Mrs. Eva," asks Lutz, "I have something I'd like to ask you too."

"What is it?" she replies, tilting her head to one side. I can tell from the way she is looking quietly back at Lutz that she intends to answer seriously.

Lutz breathes a little sigh of relief before opening his mouth. "Why aren't you fighting against Maïne becoming a merchant? My mom and dad keep saying that merchants are people that everybody hates, so why let Maïne be one?"

Well, merchants *are* people who always take their commission fees and pinch their profit margins, so I guess it's understandable for a craftsman to think badly of the profession, but... isn't saying that literally everybody hates merchants a little too harsh?

As if she heard my thoughts, my mother smiles wryly at me, then frowns slightly, looking troubled.

“I think everyone has different ideas about what merchants are like, so I can’t say anything about an entire profession like that. But, to answer your question... I think the reason I’m not objecting is that Maïne’s always been very weak, you know?”

“Huh? It’s because she’s weak?” he replies, tilting his head uncomprehendingly to the side.

My mother smiles a little. “To be honest, I wasn’t sure if there was a job Maïne *could* do. I couldn’t imagine that anyone would be able to find a use for her. So, if she’s found herself a useful job where she can do the things that she’s good at, and she’s working as hard as she can to do it, how could I possibly object to that?”

My throat tightens a little when I hear those words. The motherly love she feels for me makes my eyes grow hot.

“Oh, okay... I’m trying my hardest too, but they still won’t accept me, though...”

Hearing the bitter words he spits out, I reach out to put my hand on top of his.

“It would be good if they would, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“So, let’s make that happen. Which starts with studying!”

“Yeah, you’re right!”

Lutz smiles, and the mood immediately lightens. As the serious-talk atmosphere dissipates, Tuuli, who had been stock still the entire time, lets out a huge sigh of relief as she relaxes. She gets her sewing kit out and starts working on attaching decorations to pins. As I watch all this through the corner of my eye, I tap my finger on Lutz’s slate.

“Now, let’s start by reviewing your basic letters. Try writing them out, let’s see if you remember them all.”

“Got it.”

After giving Lutz his challenge, I resume my book-making project, writing down the stories my mother told me in my memo book. The soot pencils I’m using are much darker than a regular pencil would be, but they don’t cost me any money to use, unlike ink.

As I work, I occasionally glance over at Lutz's slate to see how he's doing. When I do, I see him writing out each letter without hesitation.

Lutz's studying is almost going *too* well. When we start our apprenticeships together at Benno's shop, his time to simply study is going to be dramatically reduced. Since he knows that this is going to be the most disadvantageous situation he could be in, he's devouring information like he was starving.

Since his family's displeasure at the idea that he might become a merchant is straining the atmosphere at his home so much, Lutz has been considering, in the worst case, leaving home entirely. For that reason, it's really obvious that he's in a hurry to cram every bit of information into his head as he can.

"Nice, you've got all the basic letters memorized, and you've written them out so neatly! That's amazing, Lutz!"

"I'm just following your lead," he replies.

Writing clean, legible letters is no easy feat without having practiced countless, countless times. Lutz isn't like me, with my experience from my past life. Now that I think about that, I really do have to admire his raw perseverance.

"Since you've got your letters down, next let's work on memorizing some words. Let's practice by writing out ordering forms, which I think is going to be the most useful."

On my own slate, I try writing out a form for ordering lumber. Since this is something I wrote up countless times while making paper, I can get it down with ease. When I finish that, I also write down the names of Benno's workshop and craftsman associates that I learned in the process.

"This is the name of the lumber merchant. This is where you put the name of the person making the order. When we were doing this, Mister Benno was doing the purchasing and then delivering it to us, so we'd put his name here. These are the kinds of lumber..."

Lutz watches me closely, trying his hardest to keep his transcriptions in pace with my writing.

"When spring comes around, do you want to try filling out the order forms for our paper-making supplies, Lutz?"

“Uh?!”

“Let’s practice a lot so that you can.”

“...Yeah!”

Having a concrete goal like that seems to have fired up his determination even more, as he starts earnestly practicing writing these forms, making sure not to misspell any words. I watch him work for a little while, then open my memo book back up and resume writing down my mother’s fairy tales. It’ll still take quite some time for me to finish copying down all of these bedtime stories.

“How about we practice math next?”

Having finally finished one story, I lean back and stretch my arms wide, calling out to Lutz. He looks up from his slate, where he’s practiced his vocabulary countless times by now, then nods at me, setting aside his slate and pulling his calculator from his bag.

“So, how about this for today?”

I start writing out math problems on my slate. Today, it’s addition and subtraction in three digits. After I get eight questions down, I look over and watch him as he uses his calculator. Unlike before, he’s barely hesitating at all as he flicks beads around on the device.

“Wow, you’re getting fast at that,” I say.

“I memorized how to do the ones-digit calculations like you said, and that’s made this way easier to do.”

“Yeah. You’re getting faster at that than I am...”

The calculations that I’m teaching Lutz are simple enough that I can just do them in my head, so I haven’t really gotten any faster at using a calculator at all. As always, it’s much faster for me to just do the math on paper than it is for me to use a calculator.

It’s because I keep lending him my calculator so he can practice.

That’s the excuse I try telling myself. I don’t have a lot of time to work with it, so of course I’m not going to get any faster. If I were to actually have a calculator on hand all the time, though, it would... still be up for debate whether or not I’d actually practice as seriously with it as Lutz does.

“Your addition and subtraction is looking pretty good for now. When the number of digits starts growing, you’ll use the calculator the same way.”

“Things start getting messy when there numbers get big, though,” he says, scratching at his cheek.

He’s been using a calculator for just about a month, though, so this is fantastic progress.

“I don’t know how to do multiplication or division on this either,” I say, “so I guess we’re stuck there.”

Since I don’t know how to do it on the calculator, for now, the only way I can teach multiplication and division is through the times table. The numbers here doesn’t flow off the tongue like they do in Japanese, so I’ll need to adapt how we’ll be reading the times table out loud. It won’t be as easy to say, but as long as he can give a quick answer when given a pair of numbers, that won’t be a problem.

He’s also gotten good at reading large numbers and can accurately convert between currency denominations. With his absorption powers, if he tries hard during his initial training, I think he’ll be able to do just fine.

...Now, what the heck do *I* do?

What my mother said earlier is stuck very firmly in my mind. “If you’re spending time on her, then you’re not going to do a very good job at your actual job as an apprentice. You’re going to do sloppy work if you’re preoccupied with her all the time.”

I am going to be nothing but a hindrance to Lutz when he’s trying to do his job. I have no strength, have no stamina, and am fundamentally useless. I guess I’ve got some use when it comes to product development, but since I don’t have any of this world’s common knowledge, without Lutz beside me to help me understand the situation, I’d wind up in a lot of trouble.

Now that I think about it, I made Benno worry, too.

I recall how he had asked me if I, with my condition, could actually work. I hum to myself thoughtfully as I ponder the answer. Here in the dead of winter, I have nothing but time to worry about this, so I absolutely have to think about this properly.

Can I actually work without being a hindrance to Lutz... or to the other employees at the shop? I wonder, what should I do?



The next day, I still didn't have a good answer, so I continue thinking about it as I idly work with my crocheting needles.

As I work, my father calls out to me. "Maïne, if you're feeling up to it, do you want to go to the gates? The snowstorm's let up for today."

"Sure, I'll go!"

I stand up with a clatter, immediately rushing to get ready to head out. I put my slate and slate pencils in my bag, then put on as many layers of clothing as I can so that I can brave the cold outdoors.

Otto is at the gates. He'll have a merchant's perspective *and* he's a relatively uninvolved third party, so I'm certain he'll be able to give me his unvarnished opinion if I ask him.

I'll try asking him for advice about whether or not it's actually alright for me to become an apprentice at Benno's shop.

Chapter 56

Otto's Consultation Room

When I step outside, I am dumbfounded by just how much snow has accumulated. During the winter, I'm essentially just a shut-in, so I've almost never really been outside like this before. So, when I look up at the snow, piled higher than I am tall, I can't help but stare blankly in awe. Through the alleys leading to the main streets, a narrow pathway has been shoveled out, allowing travelers to somehow manage to make their way forward, but the mounds of snow alongside the path look terrifyingly close to crumbling down on top of us.

"Maïne, up here," says my father. He leans down, stretching both arms wide, and I quietly let myself be picked up, clinging to his head. If I were to try to walk through this, we wouldn't make it to the gate in time for my father's shift. Now that I'm being held up, though, my head is above the snow. A cool wind blows across the broad, white expanse, sending eddies glimmering across its surface like ocean waves.

"Daddy, are you going to be shoveling snow on the main street today?"

"The noblemen have to be able to drive their carts," he agrees.

"...In this snow, I'd think I'd rather stay inside."

With this much snow on the ground, I thought there wouldn't be that many people out and about, but there are quite a few more people hurrying about their business than I expected.

"There's a lot of snow out here, but there's still so many people outside," I say.

"It's one of those rare days when the snow isn't falling, isn't it? When it is, there's about as few people out as you'd expect."

As he says this, though, a sprinkling of snow starts fluttering down from the sky, prompting my father to pick up the pace.

"It's starting to snow. Let's hurry, Maïne. Hold on tight!"

"Aaah!! I'm gonna faaall!!"

We arrive at the gate, clamoring the whole way. After taking a moment to roughly brush off the snow clinging to us, we quickly head towards the night duty room. After a light knock on the door, we push it open. A desk has been set up near the fireplace, atop which a veritable mountain of paperwork has been stacked, behind which is Otto, working on calculations.

“Otto, your long-awaited assistant has arrived!” says my father. “Make room by the fire.”

“Squad leader, thank you very much! I’ve been waiting for you, Maïne.”

The documents atop the desk rustle as Otto tidies them up, making space for me to work at. Judging by the absolutely enormous smile he’s giving me as he welcomes me, it looks like the work has piled quite high, too. I pull my slate and slate pencils from my tote bag, then haul myself up onto the slightly too-tall chair.

“Now then, Maïne. Please go over the calculations for this duty post, and make sure they match up.”

“Okay!”

Well, it looks like I won’t be able to have my discussion until this mountain of paperwork is first straightened out. I look at the pile of documents that had been set heavily on the table in front of me, and pick up my pencil.

For a while, we work in silence. The only sounds that filled the room were the quick snap of beads from Otto’s calculator and the scratching of my pencil against my slate.

A knock at the door cuts through the silence, and a young soldier steps into the room.

“Excuse me. I have a question for Otto...”

“Maïne, you handle this one.”

Otto doesn’t even look up as he volunteers me, his eyes glued to his documents and his calculator.

“Huh? Me? Oh, um, wait one moment, please, let me just finish this line...”

I finish working out the calculation, mark the answer off as verified, then look up. The young soldier looks at Otto, who is flicking the beads on his calculator around with frankly terrifying intensity, then at me, then sighs, holding out a roll of parchment.

"Please help me with this."

"What is it? ... Ahhh, a noble's introductory letter. Is the Private First-Class on duty?"

"No, he has the night shift today..."

"Then, get the chief's stamp and make immediate arrangements for them to head towards the castle walls. Since it's been a long journey through all this snow, even the gentlest noble might be on edge, so be as quick as you can."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"If you do have to keep them waiting, I think you should make sure there's a fire in the waiting room, get them in there immediately, and make them some warm tea."

"Understood."

The young soldier salutes, then rushes out of the room. I return his salute, then turn back around, resuming my calculations.

"You've gotten good at that," remarks Otto, taking a brief break from his calculations to rest his hands.

My pencil keeps moving as I reply. "They're all dealt with the same way, after all."

The work done at the gates is pure bureaucratic red tape. Fundamentally, the response to every situation is the same. Once you've read through the manual once, you can deal with everything that isn't *completely* out of the ordinary.

After calculating for another long while, I've gotten a little tired. I tidy up the pile of calculations I've verified, then lean back, stretching my arms wide. Otto, as well, seems to have found a stopping point, and starts gathering up his documents.

"Man, I'm tired," he says. "Shall we take a break?"

"Please," I reply.

Otto brings in some hot tea from the mess. As we slowly sip at it, I start asking him for advice.

"...and then, there's what my mother said to Lutz when we were talking. She said that if he was always looking after me, then he wouldn't be doing enough work to really be pulling his weight as an apprentice. If he was keeping his attention on me, he'd leave the job half-finished."

Otto gives me a look as if my mother's words were the most obvious thing in the world.

“Isn’t that obvious? If he’s only doing half of his work while looking after someone else... of course it would wind up half-finished. If Lutz is really aiming to become a merchant, he can’t afford to spend his time looking after you, I think.”

“...That’s what I thought.”

Right now, we’re not yet apprentices, so we don’t do any actual work at the store. We just go there to deliver our goods. As such, Lutz is able to keep an eye on my physical condition while we work together. When we become apprentices and have to do real work, he’s very likely not going to be able to stop worrying about me, and I can’t let myself put him under that sort of burden.

As I sit there, wondering what I should do next, Otto looks down at me with gentle eyes.

“Hey, Maïne. Are you serious about becoming a merchant?”

“That’s my plan for now, yes. I’ve been thinking of a few things I might be able to commoditize...”

My decision is based on the fact that you can’t buy or sell things without the approval of the Merchant’s Guild.

“Leaving commerce aside, I think it would be better if you didn’t work at Benno’s.”

It’s already been decided that my apprenticeship would be under Benno. I’ve lately been feeling anxious about my actual work, but I’d like to know why Otto is telling me that I shouldn’t work for Benno.

“Why do you say that?”

“That store’s growing quickly. Every single person there is working earnestly. It’ll be exhausting work, and I don’t think your body can take it.”

The reason he gives me as he lightly shrugs his shoulders is the same reason I’ve been feeling anxious, and the same thing that I heard from Benno the other day.

“...Mister Benno actually asked me the same thing, whether or not I could really do the work.”

“There’s work to be done that just involves doing calculations and validating documents, but even a merchant’s job has deadlines, so it’s hard to entrust that kind

of work to a girl who could collapse at any moment.”

“That’s true, isn’t it.”

I know full well that Benno has been thinking about how the information in my head could be turned into new goods or otherwise profited from, which is why he doesn’t want me to go to any other shop. However, when you think about my ability to actually work in a shop, my lack of strength and stamina is a fatal flaw.

Hiring an employee whose health makes her actual attendance rate constantly uncertain would be a hard decision to make, even in Japan. If *I* were in charge, I wouldn’t want that kind of employee.

“My other opinion is the kind of harsh thing you don’t really say around children, do you still want to know what it is?”

I tilt my head slightly to the side in thought, and Otto studies my reaction closely. The ultimate reason I came here was so that I could get an honest, objective opinion from someone like Otto, who doesn’t feel like they have to handle me with care. Under the table, I clench my fists, steeling myself for whatever answer I’m about to get, then slowly nod.

“Please.”

“The number one reason I think you shouldn’t go to work for Benno is, frankly, human relations. You’re going to wreck the social dynamic of the shop. If a brand new apprentice is, thanks to her poor health, constantly taking time off from work and, when she’s actually there, only doing physically undemanding work, wouldn’t all of the other employees feel more and more upset as time went on?”

“...Right.”

Even if it’s made clear that the problem is my health, there will almost certainly be problems with the people who see that kind of favoritism, even if they aren’t immediately apparent. I’d been working so frantically to make sure Lutz secured his apprenticeship that I hadn’t actually considered what things would look like after I’d actually started my own.

“And then... I think there’d be a problem with your wages, you know?”

“Hunh? My wages?” I hadn’t even considered thinking about my wages being a problem, so my voice comes out a little weird. I tilt my head doubtfully to the side.

Otto sighs. “You’re already bringing in a huge amount of profit to the store, Maïne.

There's no way the other apprentices will be making as much as you are, right?"

"My base pay would be the same. I thought I'd just be getting my share of the profits added as a special case..."

Although Lutz and I have waived our profits for making paper in order to secure our employment, I've been planning on holding tight to the profits on any goods we come up with after that. I have no intention of handing over all of my secrets for free.

"Even if it's a special case, you're still going to be a brand new apprentice earning more money than the ten year veterans at the store. I really think that'll be a huge problem."

"Ohh..."

Human relations certainly are very quick to strain when money's involved. What Otto is pointing out is completely correct. On top of that, if human relations collapses, then there's a high probability that the shop itself might go down too. A shop, ultimately, is made of people.

"It really does look like I shouldn't work at the shop, no matter how you think about it."

Every one of Otto's points is correct, and I have no rebuttal for any of them. I'm starting to feel like all I would do at Benno's shop is sow the seeds of discord amongst his employees.

"And then, there's one more thing I'm worried about."

"What is it?" I urge him on. He's laid out so much stuff already, I can take whatever he's got left.

He leans in a little closer, lowering his voice. "Maïne, your illness... it's the devouring, isn't it?"

"Mister Otto, you knew about it?!"

My eyes open wide, but Otto starts lightly shaking his head in denial.

"Ah, no, I didn't. I learned about it after Benno brought it up as a possibility. The other day, Corinna came to me and asked, 'do you know anything about this disease called the devouring?'"

"Miss Corinna did?"

"A little while ago, Benno was unusually out of sorts, it seemed, and he said something about it to her. Something about how the devouring's symptoms had suddenly

manifested, and someone nearly died in his shop? Around then, the squad leader started acting extremely out-of-sorts, too. Between his behavior and what Corinna said, I pieced together that you must have been the one to collapse from the devouring.”

“...I’m sorry to have worried everyone so much.”

It looks like the story had spread far and wide. I’d collapsed in Benno’s shop and gotten carried to the guild master’s house. In hindsight, that must have been extremely conspicuous.

“The squad leader said you’d been cured, but... from what I’ve heard from Benno, it’s incurable, isn’t it?”

“...That’s right.”

The magical implement might have staved off the devouring for the time being, but even now I can feel it building back up again. Freida, as well, had told me that it’s going to build back up to overflowing again in less than a year.

“Have you told him?”

“No, not yet,” I reply. “My family’s so happy now that they think I’ve been cured, so telling them that I haven’t been is...”

Talking about the devouring would involve discussing a lot of extremely painful subjects, like how much magical implements cost or how much longer my life will actually be, so when the subject comes up I’ve been dodging around it as obliquely as I can. I don’t know much about it myself, other than “there’s a strange fever that keeps building up inside me on its own and if it overflows then I die”, so it’s really just difficult to talk about in general.

Otto shakes his head slowly, a stern expression on his face.

“You should tell them. Your father thinks you’ve been cured, so he probably thinks that you’ll be just fine going to work. Once you’ve made sure to take care of the things you need to take care of today, then we can start talking about your job prospects for tomorrow. If you’re just going with whatever works in the moment, you’re going to cause a lot of trouble for a lot of people.”

“I understand.”

Since I’ve recently realized myself that I have a tendency to charge ahead without

regard for how much trouble I'm causing others, I have no choice but to meekly agree with Otto's rebuke.

"So, for the future, since you'll need magical implements to live, if you want to meet with the nobility then you should go to the guild master's shop, I think. Benno's shop is big, but it's still very new. No matter how hard he tries, history and tradition carry a lot of weight. That's not the kind of thing you can get past so easily."

"That may be true, but..."

As I waffle, Otto raises his eyebrows.

"Is there some sort of problem with you not working at Benno's?"

"It's not that I wouldn't be working at Benno's, it's that I don't like the guild master. He's pushy, and the way he runs his business is..."

Being overbearing might be a necessary quality for a merchant, but I can't stand that he tried to deceive me by quoting a too-low price for a life-saving magical implement. I'm certainly thankful, but I have no intention of making his acquaintance.

"Benno's the same, isn't he?"

"Hmmm, Mister Benno's pushy, and he's greedy when it comes to money, and he's the kind of person who tests other people the moment he meets them, but I can tell he's picked up on a lot of my flaws and is helping me try to grow past them."

"Ohhh?" he says, an unsettling smile spreading across his face.

His expression gives me pause. I'm absolutely certain my last sentence is going to go straight to Benno's ears.

"Also, I haven't decided yet if I want to live the rest of my life stuck uselessly under a nobleman's thumb."

Now that I've finally started to think that I actually want to keep living with my family, I'm finding it difficult to imagine wanting to live as a nobleman's pet, especially when I don't know what kind of treatment I would wind up facing. Like Freida, said, my choices are to either rot away surrounded by my family or to live out my life in a noble's captivity. If I had to make that choice right now, I think I'd choose my family.

"Well," says Otto, "if you haven't decided what you want to do with your life then there's not a lot to talk about. If you're not going to work for a shop for the sake of

building connections with the nobility, then I think even more that you should think about your other options besides working at a shop. Honestly, from where I'm standing, if you and Lutz do the "Maïne thinks it up and Lutz makes it" thing and make sure to keep control of the profits and the rights, there's no need for you to actually work for a shop, I think."

I give him a big nod. I certainly haven't been thinking about anything but working alongside Lutz, but if thinking is the only thing I can really do, then there's no real need for me to work for a shop in order to do that.

As I nod to myself, mulling his words over, Otto breaks into a beaming smile. It's such a brilliant smile that it's actually a little suspicious.

"Let me see... perhaps you could have a job that lets you work from home and keep a close eye on your health, like transcribing letters or copying paperwork, while also just focusing on developing new products? You could force your products onto Benno, and then when your health is good you can come help me with my work here. Your life wouldn't be much different than it is right now, which I think would be great for your health in the long run!"

"...I'll think about it."

Maintaining the status quo might indeed be best for my body, but I'm incredibly wary of the intent behind that suspicious-looking smile.

"Well, this is something you'll have to talk about with your family first."

"I'll do that."

"Now then, break time's over. Let's get back to it, shall we?"

Otto clears away our cups, and I put my slate back out in front of me. My pencil clacks against its surface as I go back to working out the numbers, making sure there's no mistakes in Otto's calculations.

Talking with my family, huh... I'm scared that if my father knew that I only had a year left to live that he'd go insane with grief.



“Maïne, let’s go home.”

By the time my father, finished with his shift, comes to the night duty room to pick me up, I’ve done far too many calculations. By this point, I’m dizzy. When I close my eyes, all I can see are numbers floating through my brain.

“You’ve been a big help, Maïne,” says Otto as we leave.

Otto, who’s been flicking beads around on his calculator this whole time, is still very energetic. I’m starting to think that clerical work involving nothing but calculations might be utterly impossible for me.

“Daddy, aren’t you cold?”

Snow lightly falls from the sky as we walk home. My father has wrapped me in his coat as he holds me in his arms, but while I’m nice and warm, I can’t help but think that he must be freezing.

He just smiles and shakes his head, though. “I’m not cold if I’ve got you, Maïne. I’m actually really warm!”

“Ah,” I say.

He truly loves his family and is ridiculously devoted to his daughters. How will he react when I tell him about the devouring? I worry that his smile will freeze off of his face. It’s a scary thought, but... I can’t avoid this topic any more.

“What’s wrong, Maïne? You’re looking a little gloomy.”

“...Daddy, I’ve got something to tell you. About my sickness.”

With just those words, my father stops walking, his face rigid. His mouth tightens, and he looks down at me very seriously. He casts his eyes away for a moment, then starts walking again, more quickly this time, hurrying as if he’s trying to run away from something.

“Let’s talk about it when we get home. Your mother will want to hear about it too.”

“Yeah.”

I can't tell what he's thinking about, but my fathers arm's tighten around me, holding me closer to him, as if he's never going to let me go.

Chapter 57

Family Council

“Welcome back, you two!”

Tuuli opens the door for us with a big smile. When she sees the two of us on the other side, she blinks a few times, and starts to look a little worried.

“...What’s wrong, Dad? You’re looking kind of grim, you know? Is it too cold outside? Is Maïne too heavy?”

“That’s mean, Tuuli!” I pout at her.

My father gives me a thin smile. “You’re too light, Maïne. You need to grow bigger.”

He sets me down and gently ruffles my hair. Now that his mood’s lightened a bit, Tuuli smiles slightly in relief. “Sorry, sorry,” she says, coming over and brushing off the leftover snow that was clinging to my head. In my heart, I applaud her for changing the mood so quickly.

“It started snowing a bit on the way home, and it got really cold!” I say, with a sour expression.

Copying me, she gives me a sour look back. “You got Dad to carry you, *and* you got him to wrap you up in his coat, so you weren’t cold at all, were you? I can’t do that!”

Giggling, I head to the bedroom to put my tote bag and coat away.

By the stove, my mother is working on putting dinner together. “Welcome home.... Shall we eat dinner first, then?”

It seems that, despite what we were talking about, my mother had taken in my father’s strained mood and tense facial expression and guessed that something’s up. She frowns for just a moment, then smilingly gets to work setting the table.

“Now, eat up!”

“Looks good.”

At my mother's urging, we start eating dinner. We're much less talkative than we usually are. I haven't even said anything yet, but my father's brow is furrowed, my mother is looking away, and Tuuli looks on anxiously. The atmosphere is already heavy. As I look around at the three of them, I lift a spoonful of hot soup to my mouth.

Will it really be okay if I tell them? If I say something like "I've got one year left," won't my dad just go absolutely insane? How should I bring this up? I want to hide how expensive that magic tool was, too...

I keep eating, but all I can think about is the conversation that's going to come after this, and my heart starts pounding loudly in my ears.

"Thanks for the food."

After my mother hangs up the tableware, she picks out some herbs that have a calming effect and boils them into an herbal tea. The cups clunk onto the table as she sets them in front of us.

"Did something happen?" she asks my father, sitting down next to him. "It looks like you have something to say, don't you, dear?"

He shakes his head slowly. His pale brown eyes snap to me. It's scary to see him look so serious, without a single trace of the lovestruck smile he always looks at me with. I gulp, noisily, my breath caught in my throat.

"Maïne's the one who has something she wants to talk about."

When he says that, everyone's eyes turn to me. Even though all I'm trying to do is talk to my family, my throat has gone dry from the tension.

"Umm, well, this is about my sickness, so..."

What do I say now? How should I best explain this so that it's easy to understand? Those are the only thoughts tumbling around in my head, yet the words I need to give a basic explanation won't come forth. I break out in a strange sweat, and my head goes blank as I try to hurry my thoughts along.

As I open and close my mouth soundlessly, failing to find my words, my father narrows his eyes at me.

"You've been cured, haven't you? You went to the guild master's house for a few days, and when you were cured, you came back home. Isn't that what happened?"

"Umm, the short of it is that I'm not cured."

My explanation vanishes entirely from my blank head, and I just say the conclusion. It's like I set off an enormous bomb in the middle of them. After a moment of stunned silence, they all simultaneously gasp loudly, their eyes going wide. Then, my father suddenly stands up, so forcefully it knocks his chair over, and slams his hand onto the table.

"...What do you mean?!" he says. "Was the guild master *lying* to us when he told us you were?!"

"You're not all better?!" asks Tuuli.

They crowd in close to me, my father from in front of me and Tuuli from the seat next to me. I frantically wave my hands, trying to get the two of them to calm down and sit back down.

"Whoa, calm down, sit. I don't know much about this myself, and I don't really know how to explain this, so I just said the first thing that came to my mind, so that's..."

Grinding his teeth so hard that I can hear it, my father sits back down with a clunk. My mother seems to have somehow kept her cool. She picks up her cup with shaking hands, swallows a mouthful of tea, then urges me on.

"Yes, please explain it to us properly."

Next to me, I see Tuuli reach out for her cup as well. I pick mine up too, take a gulp, and start talking.

"My sickness is, um, called the devouring. It's a really rare disease."

"I haven't heard of it..." says my father, nodding.

Tuuli, though, grips her cup tightly. In a quiet voice, she says, "Maïne told me about this before. She said it takes a lot of money to treat it."

"Money?!"

This time, it's my mother who stands up with a clatter, her eyes wide. She looks deathly pale. There's no doubt that she had noticed that the guild leader had never asked us

for any money. I'd hoped that, if at all possible, I could hide just how much money it was, but I think I'd better not try to do that now.

"Mommy, I'm trying to explain, please listen," I say.

"....."

She slowly sits back down, looking at me like she still has something to say. Feeling everyone's eyes still on me, I begin to explain, starting with the devouring itself.

"So, the devouring, it's like a fever that's always in my body, and sometimes it just starts moving around on its own, and it's always just slowly building up. If I get really mad, or if I get sad enough that I feel like I want to die, or anything like that, then it starts running wild through my body. It feels like I'm being eaten alive when that happens."

"Eaten alive..."

Tuuli is white as a sheet as she stares at me. She glances down at my fingers and then up to the fringe of my hair, as if checking to make sure I'm really not being eaten away at right now.

"The fever is something that I can keep from moving around with my willpower. If I focus on the image of locking it up deep inside me, that works for a while, but it keeps slowly, steadily multiplying."

"M... multiplying?!"

Tuuli, visibly trembling, squeezes my hand tightly.

"When I can't lock it up, then it just explodes out, like it's going to overflow out of me. If it overflows, then I'll get swallowed up, but... last time, when that happened, the fever flowed out, and I was drowning. The guild leader used a magic tool and sucked the fever away. He sucked up a lot of it, but now it's starting to build up again, so I definitely haven't been cured for good."

Tuuli, whimpering quietly, stares at me with moist, quavering eyes, looking like she's almost about to start crying. Or, maybe, instead of "staring", should I say that she's making a face like she's trying desperately *not* to start crying? I feel like I'm going to start crying too if I keep looking at her, so I turn my eyes away and instead drink another gulp of tea.

“Then, um, Freida told me that I’m not really going to get much bigger, since there’s a weird fever always nibbling away at me. You need magic tools to cure the devouring, and only the nobles have those, so they’re really expensive. Also, if your family doesn’t have connections to people in the nobility, you can’t get them either, she said.”

“So, then, it... really was the guildmaster that saved you, wasn’t it?” my father says weakly, his voice cracking. There’s no sign of his explosive emotion from earlier.

I nod. “Yeah, the guildmaster sold me one of the magic tools that he bought for Freida. But, she also said that if I didn’t have any magic tools, then I should decide really soon what I’m going to do about it.”

“Do about it? Does that mean there’s another way you can be cured?!”

My father leans forward, hope blazing in his eyes. Even Tuuli, who looked like she was moments away from crying, has a glimmer in her eyes. Seeing their sudden hope hurts me deeply, and I tell them what I could do if merely *living* was my only goal.

“She said my only alternatives were to either make a contract with a nobleman and be their pet forever, or to rot away with my family...”

“Be their pet forever?” asks my father. “What does that mean?”

From his facial expression, it seems he’s having trouble grasping the concept. Tuuli’s face is blank as she tilts her head to the side, perhaps because she didn’t understand the words I was using. My mother’s face is pale as she grips her cup.

“Freida has a contract with a nobleman, so she has the magic tools she needs to be healthy. She said that since her family is a wealthy and powerful merchant family, the contract is really favorable for her. Since I don’t have any connections to any noblemen, any contract I get would keep me alive, but she couldn’t say how well I would be treated.”

“...You can’t even call that living, can you,” he murmurs, weakly.

I nod at him. From what I learned as Urano, I can’t imagine that I’d be anything but someone that does exactly what she is told, living without any freedom at all.

“So, Maïne. How much did it cost?” asks my mother, unable to bear it any longer. “I can’t imagine that the magic tool that the guildmaster gave to you was free, you know?”

I nod, but in my heart, I know that I’m sunk.

“I had enough, don’t worry.”

“But how much was it?”

“It was a lot, but it was to save my life, so, well...”

“I’m asking you, how much was it? You can tell me, right? Don’t keep secrets.”

I try to dance around the topic, but my mother’s eyes flash dangerously as she gets angrier. I moan quietly to myself, turning my eyes away, then mumble out the answer.

“...two small gold and eight large silver.”

At the mention of a total that’s roughly what my father would make in two and a half years, everyone’s eyes go wide and their mouths drop open in shock.

“Two small gold and eight large silver?! How did you *get* that kind of—”

“I sold Mister Benno the rights to my ‘*simple shampoo*,’” I say, frantically. “The manufacturing rights, the distribution rights, the rights to set the price... I sold all of that to him, so that when the devouring—”

“Whaaaat?!” shouts Tuuli, who has constantly been helping to press out oil to make it.

“That stuff was worth *that much*?!”

Since the manufacturing process is just gathering nuts and herbs from the forest and pressing them down for oil, it’s very labor-intensive but costs nothing to make. It seems like Tuuli can’t comprehend that something like that could be sold for such an enormous amount of money.

“Yeah, it seems that if you sell it to the nobility, you can make a lot of money. He’s got a workshop for it and everything, and—”

Just as I’m about to start telling Tuuli about the workshop for making rinsham, my father interrupts, shaking his head as he stares at me angrily.

“That’s enough about that. Here’s what I want to know about: you’re sure it will relapse?”

“Yeah.”

“...When? Based on how you’ve been talking, you know, don’t you? You changed the subject so quickly, it’s something you don’t want to be asked, isn’t it?”

I didn’t expect him to be that sharp. “Wow, you caught on quick...” I sigh.

My father, just after hearing that the devouring wasn’t cured, had kicked over his chair and slammed his fists into the table. Of course I don’t want to tell someone that

enraged just how much longer I have left. Even though I'd been planning to avoid it, now that he's said that I don't think there's anyway I can weasel out of it.

"I'm your father, of course I caught on.... Come on, stay focused."

He looks at me with glinting, pale brown eyes. I get the sense that if I try to deceive him, it won't just be the truth that I'll be running away from, so I open my mouth to answer.

"...About a year."

"Wh—?!"

"She said that she thinks the next time the devouring fever overflows will be in about a year, so I need to think about things now."

A heavy, oppressive silence blankets the room. My father, who I'd thought would be enraged, hangs his head, eyebrows tightly knotted together.

Tuuli is the one to break the silence when she starts sobbing.

"*Guh...* Maïne, you're going to die? In a year?... Don't say that!!"

She cries loudly, like she's letting out all the tears she's been holding out, and leaps from her chair next to me, grabbing me in a tight hug. I wrap my arms around her and pat her on the back, trying to calm her down.

"Tuuli, calm down. I'm not dead yet, you know. Freida and the guildmaster sold me a magic tool, so now I've got another year."

The words that I had hoped would calm Tuuli down instead act like oil poured on a fire. She shakes her head furiously, crying herself ragged.

"*Ngh...* don't talk about how you were dying! It's only a year! I hate this! *Hic...* and you were finally getting better too! Like we could start going to the forest together again! You can't just die!!"

When I died as Urano, it was in a big earthquake, so I didn't have to see any of my family's grief. Did I make them cry so sorrowfully for me, I wonder? And now, I've made my new family cry, too. I'm such an awful daughter.

“Don’t cry, Tuuli. Hey, c’mon now. Even if I don’t have any magic tools, there’s got to be something I can do about the devouring, and I’m going to find out what that is.”

“And what if you *can’t* find it?! Then you’re gonna die, aren’t you?! No! I hate that! *Waaaaaah!*”

Being held so tight by someone crying all over me makes my own chest tighten up. My eyes grow hot, and even though I was trying to hold them back, my tears begin to flow, too.

“Tuuli... don’t cry. I’m the one who wants to cry...”

“*Hic*... sorry, Maïne. I’ll help you look. There might be something that can cure you somewhere, and we’ll look for it, so... *Nnn*, but, even though I’m trying not to cry I just can’t stop.”

My own tears still spilling, I pat Tuuli on the back as she tries her hardest to stop crying. My father speaks up, in a quiet voice.

“What do you plan to do, Maïne? There’s the way Freida suggested too, isn’t there?” I sniff. “...Since I don’t know how a nobleman would treat me, I can’t even imagine wanting to be separated from my family. *Hic*... Freida said that the nobleman she made a contract with is allowing her to stay with her family until she grows up. So, what would have happened if he didn’t?”

The answer is obvious.

“She’d have been taken away immediately, wouldn’t she? There probably aren’t that many noblemen who’d wait, I think...”

“...Mm, you’re right.”

I have not even the slightest clue as to what in the world a nobleman would find useful about the devouring fever. However, I think that one who would grant some extra time after signing the contract would be someone benevolent indeed. If I consider that I’d be taken away as soon as the contract is complete, I know that I won’t have much time with my family at all if I go down that path.

“So, you know, I’m thinking that it might be okay if I live with my family until I die. *Uu*... I don’t want to leave you all...”

“Maïne...”

Tears glisten in my mother's eyes as well. She turns away slightly, as if she doesn't want her children to see it, and wipes them away. My father keeps a neutral expression, his eyes fixed on me.

"I've still got a year," I say. "So, I'm going to try my hardest to do the things that I want to do, and live so that I have no regrets.... Can I stay here? Or... is it better for me to go away with a noble?"

"Maïne, stay here with me!" says Tuuli. "Don't you dare go away!"



Both of my parents nod, as if Tuuli had spoken for all of them.

I wipe away my tears, happy to be told that I can stay here, and give them a strained smile.

“So, here’s what I actually wanted to ask you...”

“There’s more?” asks my mother, startled.

All of this exposition to make them aware of the state of my illness wasn’t actually *asking* them anything, though. Now that they know what’s going on, I’d like some advice from them.

“It’s about... my work.”

“You’re going to be a merchant, right?” asks my father, frowning doubtfully.

Taking solace in the fact that my father is listening to me calmly instead of raging, I continue.

“That was the plan, but maybe I was being naïve, or maybe not thinking through it all the way, but... it’s not the kind of job that I can do, given my strength, you know? Mister Otto said something like that too, like I’d just be a bother at the shop.”

“Ugh, *Otto*...” growls my father, irritatedly.

All I wanted to do was get Otto’s objective, outside viewpoint. It would be disastrous if my father were to explode on him later. Frantically, I start outlying the plan he had suggested.

“So, what he proposed was that I take a job I can do at home, like copying letters or official documents, then I can keep going just like I am now, selling things to Mister Benno and then helping at the gate when I’m feeling healthy enough.”

“Oh, Otto said that, huh...? Hmm, he’s right. It’s best for you to stay home. You shouldn’t overdo things.”

He sounds a little happy, his mouth quirking up into a smile as he confidently declares this. Both Tuuli, who is still clinging to me and sobbing, and my mother nod vigorously in agreement.

“Um, I’d made a promise with Mister Benno to work at his shop already, though... is it okay to break it?”

This is what I wanted to ask my parents the most, since I still don't really know much about anything work-related in this town. Would there be issues if I were to break this arrangement?

"It's not like you've officially started work yet," says my father. "Since it'll be hard on him too if you suddenly collapse on the job, I'm sure it'll be alright if you make sure you explain things thoroughly to him."

"Okay! So, even though I hate to waste a job offer that I'd worked so hard to get, I'll try hunting for a job that fits my condition."

Perhaps I should consult with Benno to see if there really is a job that I can do at home. I'll need to make sure to ask him in detail when springtime comes around.

Because the conversation had dragged on for so long, the instant there's a gap in the conversation an enormous yawn forces its way out of my throat. Seeing this, my mother claps her hands together.

"If that's all you have to talk about, go to bed already. It's late!"

"Yeah. Good night."

"*Snf... hic... goog night...*"

Tuuli, still blubbering, accompanies me to the bedroom and crawls into bed with me.

"Tuuli, don't cry. You're way cuter when you smile! Tomorrow let's do lots of things together."

"Okay, yeah, let's play together a lot! Because you're here."

As I console her, I slip beneath the covers of my bed. She immediately follows, grabbing onto me tightly as if she's not going to let me go anywhere. I decide to leave her be, if it'll calm her down, and close my eyes.

I thought my father was going go berserk or start screaming, but unlike what I was expecting he simply sat and listened to me, saying very little. I let out a sigh of relief, glad that I was able to properly say everything I needed to, and slowly drift off to sleep.



I had decided to let Tuuli do whatever she needed to do in order to let her calm down as we slept, but now my eyes snap open as I realize I'm being strangled. I frantically unwind her arm from around my neck and escape from there.

I nearly *died*! Not even from the devouring, but from being choked to death.

As I rub my neck, I blink a few times. Ordinarily, when I wake up at night, the bedroom is usually pitch black, but now there's a dim light filtering in. I rub my tired eyes, but this doesn't seem to be a dream. The door is half-open, and I can tell that there's still a fire lit in the stove. I can't hear any voices, so I don't think that both of my parents are still awake. Looking through the gloom, I see a dark lump on my mother's bed; perhaps because she's already gone to sleep.

Did she forget to put out the stove?

I quietly slip out of bed, stepping as lightly as I can to avoid waking Tuuli, and head towards the kitchen.

In the gloom of the kitchen, lit only by the flickering of the stove, my father sits alone, drinking. Unlike the happy drunkard he is in my memories, he sits there, wordlessly drinking, and crying silently.

I avert my eyes, as if I could hear his voiceless wailing, and quietly go back to bed.

Chapter 58

Reporting to Lutz

The day after the family council, everyone was a little bit awkward around each other. My father's smile looked a little bit lonely, my mother hugged me over and over throughout the day, and Tuuli kept suddenly bursting into tears. However, as the days pass, everything starts gradually returning to the same old day-to-day life that we'd been living before.

"You don't have to do that, Maïne. I've got it," says Tuuli.

"Huh? I've got to do it! Aren't you the one who told me that I'll never learn how to do something unless I do it myself?"

Tuuli, who had previously been encouraging me to help out more so that I could work on building my own independence, thoughtlessly takes over my work. It's unmistakeable that she's taking even more special care of me than she already was before.



I'm woken up by Tuuli's excited shout. "Whoa, it cleared up! We have to go pick paru today!"

The sky is still dim and gloomy, but it seems like there isn't much snow falling at all. Tuuli had seen a little bit of light coming in through the window and thrown it open wide to check the weather, letting the freezing air outside come rushing in.

"Tuuli, I'm cold!"

"Ah! Sorry, sorry."

She closes the window, then immediately gets started in on her breakfast. I, too, eat my breakfast, while my family noisily hustles around the house. The instant they finished their food, my mother and father started gathering up baskets and firewood. My father, starting to organize things by the entryway, looks up at me as I, still unkempt, chew on my bread.

“What will you do today, Maïne? Are you going to the gates?”

“Nuh-uh, I was thinking that I’d go and try help picking paru, maybe?”

From what Tuuli had told me, a paru tree is a beautiful and miraculous kind of plant. I’m not entirely sure what she meant when she said how it sparkles brilliantly with light as it spins around, though, so I kind of want to see it for myself. But, when my curiosity prompts me to say those words, every single member of the family turns to stare at me.

“Absolutely not! You’ll either stay here and watch the house or you’ll go help out at the gates.”

“Picking paru is very hard, too hard for you! You’ll definitely get sick!”

“That’s right! You’re bad at climbing trees, and you can’t walk through snow so it’s impossible for you to help.”

All three of them immediately reject the idea of me accompanying them to the winter forest to pick paru. Certainly, there’s no way someone such as me, who can’t even walk through the snow to get to the gates, would be capable of foraging in a snowy forest.

“...Okay. You’ll be picking paru until noon, right? So, I’ll go to the gate and help out there while I wait for you.”

I prepare my tote bag and get myself ready to head out to the gates. I’d thought that since my father had the day off Otto might as well, but it seems that around this time of year he shows up nearly every single day.

My family loads up their baggage, including me, onto a sled, and we head off. I’d heard that everyone in the town goes to pick paru whenever they can, and based on the huge number of people dragging their sleds towards the southern gates, I’d heard correctly. The air is so cold that it bites into my skin, but everyone is filled with such excitement over being able to go and pick paru that the mood is very much like a festival. Even I am getting a little excited too.

“Sorry,” says my father to a soldier at the gate, “but take care of Maïne for me. She’ll be helping Otto out until noon.”

“Yes sir!”

“Everyone, good luck picking paru!” I say.

When we arrive at the gate, I get off the sled and wave goodbye to my family as they head towards the forest. I say hello to the gatekeeper, who I'm acquainted with, and head to the night duty room.

"Mister Otto, good morning."

"Oh? Maïne? I thought the squad leader had the day off, didn't he?"

Otto's eyes twinkle in wonder, and I nod, smiling slightly.

"Yes, since the weather is clear today, he went to the forest to pick paru. I'll be helping out until noon today."

"Ahh, I see, I see. Hm, until noon, huh..."

Otto smiles broadly, seeming to immediately understand the circumstances, then starts laying out documents that he needs the calculations checked on. While he works on clearing a space for me to work, I thank him for the advice he gave me the other day.

"Mister Otto, thanks for the other day."

"Hm?"

"Umm, when you consulted with me about my job prospects. I told my family about the devouring, and about finding a job that I can do from home. When spring comes, I'm thinking I'll consult with Mister Benno, too..."

"Ah! Well, taking care of yourself is very important, so if Benno has no idea what you could do, then my door is always open if you'd like to ask about things you can do here."

"Alright!"

I definitely notice a hint of something dark in his smile, but now that I've properly expressed my gratitude, I get to work on my calculations, feeling refreshed.



After noon, my family returns from the forest, so I get back on the sled and head home. Since there were three of them out picking today, it looks like they've brought six paru back with them. Unlike last year, now we know that even the dried-up lees is useful, so my mother is in very high spirits.

While my mother works on preparing lunch, Tuuli and I work on juicing the paru.

Tuuli grabs the skinniest stick she can find from the pile of firewood, lights it in the fire from the stove, then jabs it into the fruit. In the next instant, just that little bit of the rind cracks open.

“Maïne, here it comes!”

“Got it~!”

I stick a bowl under it, so as not to waste any of the creamy white fluid that starts spilling out. Entranced by the sweet smell, we finish draining the juice, then Tuuli passes off the drained paru to our father. He crushes the pit of the fruit, pressing the oil out of it. Since he’s able to lift the heavy weight we use for pressing oil, leaving that part of the task to him means that the oil is finished in the blink of an eye. Since the lees left over after the fruit has been thoroughly squeezed has actual use in cooking, we set aside four parus’ worth of it for ourselves, leaving the remaining two to give to Lutz’s house in exchange for eggs.

After lunch, I head out, bringing both the paru lees and some fresh ideas for recipes. If I could only just use an oven, I could make a gratin or a pizza, but since all I have access too are a griddle and a pot, the kinds of things that I can make are sharply limited.

“Hi, Lutz. Could you trade me for some eggs, please? By the way, I came up with a new recipe, do you want to try it?”

“Yo, Maïne! I’m happy about the new recipe, but there’s nobody around to help out right now so we can’t start on it yet. Come on and wait in here.”

Even though I finally brought them a new recipe, Lutz’s older brothers aren’t here, it seems.

“Where’re your brothers? Did they go sledding or something, since it’s clear out?”

“Those kids went out to earn a little change shoveling snow,” says Lutz’s mother.

I had no idea this was a thing, since there’s no way I could participate, but it seems like some of the heavy labor of shoveling snow is something that kids can do in order to earn some decent pocket money.

“Why’re you still here, Lutz?”

“Someone’s got to juice the paru. If you wait too long, they’ll melt, right?”

It's true that you can't just leave paru alone for a while, but I can't help but notice that it looks like Lutz has been stuck with the housework, unable to earn any pocket money, and I'm realizing that he's actually looking a little gloomy. But, since neither Lutz or Auntie Karla are saying anything, I figure that I, as an outsider, should probably keep my mouth shut.

I'd at least like to help them with pressing the fruit, but since that's something that fundamentally requires actual physical labor, it's beyond my capabilities. All I can really do is watch as Lutz smashes the core with a hammer and Auntie Karla presses the oil out.

As I absent-mindedly look on, I suddenly remember that I haven't actually told Lutz about the family council. Letting him know that I won't be working at Benno's shop is something that I absolutely have to do.

"Um, so, Lutz. I've, uh, decided that I'm not going to work at Benno's shop."
"What?! Why?!"

Lutz, his hammer raised high, turns to stare at me with wide eyes. Auntie Karla looks over at me as well, her eyes open a little wider too.

"Umm... my mother mentioned something like this, right? I'd just be a burden on you. Plus, no matter how I think about it, I don't have enough stamina for a job like that. I talked with Mister Otto about it, and he pointed out a few different things."
"A few things like what?"

Lutz gradually starts moving his hammer again, urging me on with a stare.

"Right, um. So, if a brand new apprentice keeps getting fevers and has to rest all the time, what do you think everyone else that has to work with her is going to think?"
"...Ahh. That's..."

Murmuring quietly to himself like he might be starting to understand, he hits his paru. Auntie Karla, firmly pressing hers, squints.

"You'd be a bother to everyone when you're absent," she muses, "and you being absent during your training would hurt you in the long run, too..."
"That's right.... Plus, I've still got lots of things I'm planning on making, and if they wind up being really profitable, I'm going to earn a lot of money, you know? So if

there's an apprentice that's always absent, but she still makes a ton of money, wouldn't that ruin human relations at the shop?"

"You're right..."

Lutz scowls, nodding in understanding, but Karla looks a little astonished.

"Well," I say, "the bit about the money applies to you too, I think, but if you work as hard as you can, I think people's reactions will be different. I think we should discuss this with Mister Benno in detail, though."

"Yeah, let's make sure we talk to him in the spring."

I think it might be possible to keep Lutz's profits separate from his wages. Then, he could be given the extra money secretly. After all, even now, all it takes to give someone money is to tap your guild cards together.

"If you're not going to work at the shop, then what are you going to do after your baptism, Maïne?"

"In my case, I don't know what I'm going to do about the devouring, so I'd work out of my home transcribing letters or official documents while coming up with new products, or helping out at the gates... I told my family that I don't really want my lifestyle to change all that much."

"Ah, okay. Yeah, that's probably better for your body."

Now that I have Lutz's support, I let out a little sigh of relief. As I do, Auntie Karla's expression suddenly brightens.

"Well, now! If Maïne's not going to work at the shop, then there's no need for you to work there either, Lutz, is there? Now you can be a craftsman!"

I tilt my head to the side, confused. What does me deciding not to work at Benno's shop have to do with Lutz not working there? Lutz, however, raises his eyebrows high as soon as he hears his mother's sigh of relief.

"Huh?! What are you saying, mom?!"

"What do you mean?" she asks, a complete lack of comprehension on her face.

Lutz clucks his tongue. "I want to be a merchant!" he yells. "Maïne has nothing to do with it! *I'm* the one who dragged *her* into it!"

She stares at him, looking as if she can't believe a word he's saying.

“What did you just say?! So, you *still* are planning on becoming a merchant?”

“Of course I am! I really wanted to be a trader, but after I talked with one I learned about how citizenship works, so I decided I wanted to be a merchant instead.”

“Lutz, why didn’t you say *anything* about this before?!”

“I did! Were you not listening, or did you just forget?!”

It looks like she really hadn’t acknowledged what he’d been saying. She looks at him as if this is the first time she’s ever heard this.

I, not wanting to intrude into a conversation between mother and son, watch quietly from my chair, not saying a single unnecessary word.

“...You did say that you wanted to be a trader,” she says.

She shakes her head weakly, a troubled expression on her face. It’s clear to see that she’s bewildered by how her expectations aren’t matching up with reality.

“But, that was just a childish fantasy, wasn’t it? That was just something you were dreaming about, not something that had any basis in reality, wasn’t it? I didn’t actually think that’s something you really had your sights set on. I’ve been thinking that you’d eventually come to your senses.”

I think that what Auntie Karla is saying isn’t unreasonable at all. It’s rare for someone who lives in the city to go any farther than the forest or the surrounding farmland. A trader is a foreigner that unexpectedly drops in from time to time, not someone that anyone typically aspires to be. It’s a childish fantasy, and he needs to wake up from it soon. Karla’s line of thought is probably pretty typical of people living around here.

“...I really did want to be a trader. I want to leave this city, and go to other cities that I’ve never been to before. I wanted to see all sorts of things that I haven’t even heard of... and I still do! I’m still holding onto that dream.”

“Lutz, you...”

Auntie Karla rises halfway from her seat, looking like she’s about to say something. From her expression, it’s probably some sort of objection to his train of thought. However, before she can say anything, Lutz continues talking.

“But, I talked to someone who used to be a trader himself. He told me that only an idiot

would give up his citizenship. And traders don't have apprentices, so it would be impossible for me, anyway."

"Well, he was right," she says, looking a little bit relieved. She sits down with a thump.

It seems that being a trader is an occupation that is very much something to avoid. I'd thought, naively, that being able to travel the world and see the sights sounded really fun, but I still really haven't internalized enough of this world's common sense.

"So then, once I found out that I couldn't be a trader's apprentice, I started thinking that maybe I could just go out and be a trader on my own. Then Maïne told me that maybe instead of being a trader, I could be a merchant in this city. If I was a merchant, then I could still go to other towns to buy and sell things, she said. It's more pragmatic, and more realistic to try to do."

She shrugs. "Well, compared to being a trader..." she says, tiredly. It seems like she had no idea that her son was serious about his plans to become a trader, so this might be a bit of a shock for her.

"So, I told a merchant that I wanted to be his apprentice. He was only a second-hand acquaintance of Maïne's, though, so he basically refused me right away."

"...Sounds about right."

With how the apprenticeship system works in this town, Lutz's odds of actually becoming a merchant's apprentice were really slim. So, probably, even though Lutz kept telling her that he wanted to be a merchant, she didn't consider it to be any more than some half-hearted ideal. Then, working from that assumption, she might not have ever really fully listened to Lutz when he explained that he actually would be able to do it.

"But, we got him to set out some conditions, and agree to let us apprentice under him if we met them. Maïne and I already met those conditions, so we've got his approval to be his apprentices. So, whether Maïne's there or not, I'm going to be a merchant."

Karla finally looks directly at Lutz, a serious look in her eyes, noticing at long last that Lutz has started forging his own path forward.

"...Lutz, even if you got this man's permission to be his apprentice, did you really think you could do so if your parents disapproved?"

"I already decided that I'd do it. In the worst case, I'd be a live-in apprentice. I got him to hear me out, I got him to set some conditions, and I finally started on a path towards becoming his apprentice. I'm not gonna give that up."

“A... live-in apprentice...?”

Being a live-in apprentice is probably among the worst lifestyles you could have. First of all, as an apprentice, you can only actually work half of the week, so your wages are low. Plus, you have no family to rely on. A child suddenly forced to live on their own would find it both really physically taxing as well as time-consuming.

His living quarters would be the attic on the topmost floor of the building. Summers would be hot, and winters would be cold. It wouldn't be at all rare for the roof to constantly leak. Carrying things upstairs, especially water, would be an enormous undertaking. It's not unusual for birds to nest in attics, like they do in Lutz's home, so the smell would be horrific, too. Plus, unlike the rooms rented out for families to live in, there wouldn't be any place for Lutz to cook, so he'd need to either get someone else at the shop to let him use theirs or eat out a lot.

Naturally, that kind of lifestyle isn't something that leaves you with any money left over. Rather, he'd need to constantly be taking advances on his pay, putting him in debt. The shop would provide the bare minimum to keep him alive, but until he grew up he would basically be living solely to work his apprenticeship.

“Lutz, think about what you're saying! Do you really think you could live that kind of life?!”

I don't think any normal parent would want their son to have to live such an austere life. She raises her voice so high it's practically a shriek. Lutz, however, just shrugs.

“I can, yeah. I've started preparing for that already.”

In Lutz's case, he'll be able to save up the money we're going to make from paper-making during the spring. If we use the bark that we've already got in the storehouse, we'll be able to put quite a lot of money in the bank. By my calculations, even after buying the clothing necessary to be a merchant's apprentice, he'll still have a sizable amount left over.

Plus, during his apprenticeship he'll have half of his days off, which he'll be able to spend with me, developing new products to potentially make money off of. If we can do that, then there's no doubt that he'll be making much more than an ordinary apprentice's wages. He won't have a lot of room in his budget to spare, but I think it'll definitely be much better than destitution. I don't think he'd have enough extra money

to rent a place for himself, though, so he wouldn't really be able to do anything about his awful living conditions.

"...You're serious about already preparing, aren't you?"

"Very serious."

After a long silence, Auntie Karla lets out a deep sigh, slumping her shoulders. She wears a complicated expression, like she's given up on challenging Lutz's seriousness but still can't give up altogether.

"I still think it would be better if you found a nice, steady job as a craftsman instead of something as unstable as being a merchant."

Lutz purses his lips in dissatisfaction. "...If I do what you say and become a craftsman, nothing's going to change, is it?"

Auntie Karla squints at him. Since he just effectively said he's dissatisfied with his current life, her mood quickly grows sharp.

"What do you mean by that?"

"My brothers do whatever they want with me, and when I have something they want the just take it, and I never have anything left for myself."

"That's... you're siblings, so of course they take things from you, but they give things too you as well, don't they?"

She frowns, troubled. Lutz, however, immediately rejects her opinion.

"It's not like they can give my food back after they eat it, and when I get stuff from them it's all just broken hand-me-downs, you know? And if the hand-me-downs are too awful to actually use and I get something new for once, then they immediately take it away!"

The fact that the youngest child always gets hand-me-downs is something that's true for me as well. However, while Tuuli is always helping me out, Lutz is constantly being ordered around by his brothers. I don't know if that's just what brothers do to each other, but the difference between the two of our experiences is enormous.

"I set my sights on becoming a merchant, worked really hard doing a lot of different things with Maïne, and learned what it's like to actually hold onto something I've earned. I want to see how far I can take myself without anyone getting in the way. I've

never even *considered* being a craftsman.”

Lutz, who has always been kept down by his family, has made it his goal to find an environment where he can be free of their control, and he was finally able to find a place where he might be able to accomplish his dreams.

Auntie Karla hangs her head. “I didn’t think you were so serious,” she says softly. “I thought this was just Maïne dragging you along...”

“I wouldn’t make this kind of life-changing decision if it was like that...”

“I really thought it was, so that’s why I was objecting.”

She lets out a long, deep sigh, looking down at the floor. She thinks to herself for a while, then slowly raises her head, a smile on her face as if she’d come to accept things as they are.

“If you’ve thought it through that far, and this is something you really want to do, to the point where you even started preparing to leave home, then why not go for it as much as you can? Your father will probably object, but you’ll have at least one supporter in this family.”

“Really?! Thanks, Mom!!”

Lutz’s face is practically sparkling. He had long since giving up on earning his family’s understanding, so hearing something so unbelievable makes him so happy he could jump for joy. Until just a moment ago, he’d been forcing himself to look focused, but now his expression is something that a child his age should actually be wearing, and I can’t help but smile, too. Having even just one family member on his side must make a whole world of difference.

When his brothers come home, Lutz is still in a good mood. The four of them work harmoniously together as they start making my new recipe.

“Zasha,” I say, “could you and Zeke please heat the griddle? Lutz, please grate plenty of cheese and mix it with the paru lees. Then, Ralph, could you chop those lege leaves finely, please?”

While I divide up the work amongst the brothers, I add some paru oil and salt to the bowl that Lutz is grating cheese into. Once Ralph is done chopping the basil-like herb, I add it to the bowl, and all that’s left is to mix it and grill it.

“The griddle’s hot!”

“Alright, then grill this please, like how you do the parucakes.”

We grill it thoroughly, until the cheese gets crispy, then eat it. It looks kind of like okonomiyaki¹, but thanks to the melted cheese that’s holding everything together, it has a very western flavor. This recipe is a variation on something I’d come up with in my Urano days, making use of leftover cooked somen or spaghetti noodles by chopping them up really finely.

“It’s so simple, but it’s so filling!”

“It would be really good if you added minced ham or veggies, too,” I add.

“Yeah, now that I think of it, these would actually make a good meal on their own, unlike the parucakes.”

Everyone eats their food, smiling happily about how delicious it is. In the middle of that, Ralph tries to help himself to seconds off of Lutz’s plate, but Auntie Karla smacks him in the back of his head.

“Don’t take other people’s food. That’s greedy! How about you grill another for yourself?”

Ralph, who had just gotten smacked on the head, looks at her with mild shock. Lutz does, too. After a moment, Ralph gets up to start grilling up his seconds, and Lutz goes back to eating, relieved. Karla watches the two of them, then smiles. Now that Lutz has convinced someone as influential as her of his problems with the rest of the family, it looks like things have calmed down around here, at least for now.



After that, I return to being a shut-in. My life becomes an endless cycle of handiwork, tutoring Lutz, helping at the gate, and lying in bed with a cold, while Lutz keeps stopping buy to deliver hairpin parts, be tutored, and occasionally bringing completed product over to Benno’s shop.

Eventually, the snow starts gradually getting weaker, and my wintry shut-in lifestyle comes to an end.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Okonomiyaki are a savory grilled food, kind of like a pancake with a variety of other ingredients inside.

Chapter 59

Working Towards Resuming Paper-Making

The snow has begun to melt, and the days have grown clearer. The days are still cold, but my family has said it's no problem for me to go out to Benno's shop, so Lutz and I get ready to make our way there to settle the final accounts for our winter's handiwork. Each person who helped with the work has entrusted me with a small bag to put their earnings into. I put these into my tote bag, along with the last completed hairpins, and we head towards the shop.

Traces of winter still remain: the center of the main road has been cleared of snow, but in the corners of the alleyways there's still some snowmen that have yet to melt, and along the sides of the road there are still mountains of snow that had melted a little bit and then refrozen hard. The faces of everyone who has gone out to meet the new spring are bright, and their footsteps are buoyant as they go to and fro along the streets. The number of carts and carriages on the main road has significantly increased as well.

It looks like the number of people visiting Benno's shop is much higher than normal, so even though we've arrived in the afternoon, where there are usually comparatively few people present, it seems extremely busy. As I ask Lutz if it might be best for us to come back later, Mark appears, walking towards us. It seems as if one of the employees that we've become acquainted with might have noticed us and called him over.

"Good afternoon," I say. "It's good to finally see you again, Mister Mark."

"Ah, Lutz and Maïne! Blessings upon the thawing of the snow. May the goddess of spring bring you great favor."

Mark raises his right fist in front of his chest, then presses his left palm to it, fingers together, slightly bowing his head. I have no idea whatsoever what he could possibly be doing, so Lutz and I stare wide-eyed at him.

"Uh? What was that?"

"...It's the way you greet someone in the new spring?"

Judging by Mark's tone of voice, he doesn't know how we couldn't know what that was, so I can guess that this is some sort of extremely obvious greeting that is exchanged around here.

"This is the first time I've heard it. Lutz, did you know about this?"

"No, it's my first time, too."

If Lutz hasn't heard of it, then it may be something unique to this particular part of the city, or perhaps it's something occupationally-related.

"...Is this maybe a greeting only merchants use?"

"It is something that has always been done in my family," Mark replies, "so I haven't given it much consideration, but all of the socialization I have done outside of work has been with other merchants, so that might be entirely possible. Since business booms as the snow thaws, we wish blessings upon the thawing of the snow, and greet our fellows by wishing that the goddess of spring brings them great favor."

Having said that, he teaches us this merchant's greeting. It looks like this is a greeting you give the first time you meet someone in the spring. I'm just going to file this away as something similar to "happy new year".

As Mark did a moment ago, I put my right fist in front of my chest, press my left hand against it, and try practicing the greeting.

"Blessings upon the thawing of the snow...?"

"That's right," he says.

"May the goddess of spring bring you great favor, I think."

I quietly mutter it to myself over and over, but I'm fairly confident I will have completely forgotten about this by tomorrow. It's times like this that really remind me that I very much want a notepad. I may have a slate tucked in my tote bag, but that's not a notepad.

"The master is presently conducting a negotiation. What matters of business might you need to speak with him about?"

In response, I start ticking off the things I'd like to do today on my fingers.

"Umm, first I would like to settle accounts regarding our winter handiwork. Next, since

I'd like to resume paper-making as quickly as possible, I'd like to verify whether or not the craftsman has finished making the larger bamboo mats by now. Also, I would like to speak with Mister Benno about my apprenticeship, but it seems he's currently busy?"

"I understand. Very well; let us begin with settling your winter's handiwork. He should finish his business while we work."

He guides us to a small table inside the shop. Lutz and I sit down next to each other, and Mark seats himself opposite us.

"These are the last of the hairpins we made for our handiwork, if you please," says Lutz, speaking in much more polite language than he's used to using.

He presents the bag containing the hairpins. Mark removes them from the bag to count them.

"There are twenty-four here," he says. "Including the ones you left with us during the winter, this makes a total of one hundred and eighty-six, is that correct?"

"Yes sir, that is correct." Lutz nods, having verified Mark's final count matches the tally we had made on a small board.

Each hairpin is worth five medium copper coins. From that, the handling fee Lutz and I are charging will be deposited directly into the guild. Then I take out the various bags that I'd brought with me in order to make distributing the rest of the money easier, and start dividing it up.

To make sure that Lutz's brothers don't fight, we divide their share evenly across the three of them, excluding Lutz. Splitting it up is easy: each of them gets six large and two medium copper coins. As for my family, my mother made eighty-three, Tuuli made sixty-six, and I made thirty seven. Since these numbers are all over the place, splitting it up is a bit of a pain. My mother winds up with one small silver, six large copper, and six medium copper coins. Tuuli's share is one small silver, three large copper, and two medium copper coins, and my share is seven large and four small copper coins.

"With this number of pins, we should have stock to last us until next winter," says Mark. "There's quite a lot of demand for these! Since there are so many colors to choose from, our customers seem to enjoy themselves picking theirs out."

I smile, imagining a parent and child picking out a hairpin together.

"Ah, is that so? I'm glad," I say. "I made myself a hairpin as well, you know!"

"How might it be decorated?"

I giggle. "That will be a secret until the day of the ceremony."

Mark quirks an eyebrow. "Oh my," he says. "Then, I shall look forward to seeing it on that day. Now then, you next wished to discuss the resuming of your paper-making, did you not?"

"That's correct," I say. "We won't be able to actually resume work until Lutz has had the opportunity to visit the forest and check on the state of the river, but since spring has come, I think that I would like to start as soon as possible."

Benno's investment will only continue until the early summer, when our baptismal ceremony will be held. Thus, I'd like to resume our work as soon as we can.

Mark nods slightly. "Very well. I shall ask the workshop about your order. If I'm correct, you wished for two bamboo mats, the size of a contract sheet?"

"Yes, sir, thank you very much."

I notice several merchants leaving the back room, as if the negotiations taking place there finished at about the same time we had finished our discussion out here.

"I shall go inform the master of your presence. Please, wait one moment."

After he momentarily disappears into the back room, he returns to lead us in. Since this is the first time I'm meeting Benno this spring, I promptly press my left palm into my right fist in front of my chest, delivering the greeting I'd memorized.

"Mister Benno, it is good to see you again. Blessings upon the thawing of the snow. Oh, um... may the goddess of spring's, um, great favor... huh?"

As I struggle to remember something I'd heard just a moment ago without the aid of a notepad, Lutz looks at me in amazement. He steps in front of me, pressing his left palm into his right fist in front of his chest.

"Master Benno, blessings upon the thawing of the snow. May the goddess of spring bring you great favor."

"Aha, yes, that! Blessings upon the thawing of the snow. May the goddess of spring bring you great favor."

Thanks to Lutz jogging my memory, I deliver the proper greeting. Benno, visibly trying not to laugh, returns our greeting.

“Ahh, blessings upon the thawing of the snow. May the goddess of spring bring you great favor.... I have to say,” he says, chuckling, “that was a very sloppy greeting. Make sure you learn to say it correctly.”

He taps the table with his finger, beckoning Lutz and I to sit down. We do so, and then talk about the spring well-wishing.

“That was something we just learned from Mark a little earlier, you know. It’s not something either of us heard growing up, so say something like, ‘very good for your first try’, please!”

“...Oh, is that so? Then, good work, Lutz. Now then, you wanted to talk about your apprenticeship?”

Benno only praised Lutz, who’d completely remembered the greeting. I pout, briefly, before launching into today’s main question.

“I won’t be apprenticing here after my baptism,” I say.

“Huh?... Wait. Why are you saying this? Is it because I didn’t praise you just now? Well, you didn’t say it right, but at least you tried?”

He rubs hard on his temples, uncomprehendingly, and forces out some praise for my greeting.

“That’s not it! It has nothing to do with that.”

“If not that, then what?”

“Umm, well, I’m kind of weak, you know?”

“Astoundingly so, yes.”

His interjection stabs straight into my heart.

“Urgh... You were worried earlier about whether or not I’d be able to properly do my work here, weren’t you? If you had an apprentice who was always taking days off because of her poor health and was only being assigned easy work that wouldn’t put a strain on her body then, if you think about it, wouldn’t that be bad for human relations here at the shop?”

“Is that all?”

He glares down at me with his reddish-brown eyes, and I remember the other concerns that Otto had raised with me.

“Also, if I’m earning profits from my goods, then isn’t there the chance that I’d be making more money than even the veterans who’ve been working here for over ten years? Money’s the easiest way to ruin relationships.”

“Who told you that?” he says, eyes narrowed. “There’s no way you would have come up with that on your own.”

I nod vigorously. Back when I was Urano, the only thing I ever did or ever really wanted to do was read, so my field of view was pretty narrow. This time around, I hadn’t really been considering anything but my own physical strength. It took Otto pointing things out for me to start thinking about human relations.

“Mister Otto,” I reply.

“...I see.”

Huh? I think his voice just now was pitched a fraction of a step lower... And then, he’s got a sort of predatory aura going on now... or am I imagining things?

I tilt my head slightly to the side as I think about Benno’s ferocious aura, then say the thing that’s been weighing most heavily on my mind.

“Also, you know about my devouring, right? If I were making the decision, then I don’t think I’d hire an employee that I wasn’t sure would still be around in a year.”

It’s very likely that any resources spent on my education will go entirely to waste. I don’t think a merchant would be capable of wasting resources like that.

Benno rubs his forehead, looking at me with sharply discerning eyes.

“Then, if you’re not working at my shop, what do you plan to do instead?”

“I’ll be transcribing letters or official documents at home, working with Lutz to develop new products on his days off, and from time to time helping out at the gates... basically, I’ll just keep doing what I’ve been doing. After talking with my family, I’ve decided that it’s best for me to do things that don’t place too much of a strain on my body.”

“And being an apprentice and so on would. Got it.”

The strain goes out of his eyes and shoulders. He rubs at his temples, looking like he's trying to figure out what he's going to do next. As he mutters to himself, I speak up again.

"Umm, Mister Benno. Do you have any work that I might be able to do at home?"

In that moment, Benno's eyes gleam, and a slow, predatory smile spreads across his face.

"Your writing is very neat, hm. I can send some amanuensis work your way, so stop by with Lutz from time to time. Alright?"

"Thank you very much."

What was that just now? I feel like I've just been cornered by a carnivorous beast...

Since my request was accepted so easily, I put aside my deep thoughts and move onto my other question.

"Umm, so if that's the case, what's going to happen to my guild card? I'm planning on selling through Lutz, but I'm not going to have an apprentice's card from your shop, right? I'll be unaffiliated, right?"

We had originally planned around my eventual registration as an apprentice at Benno's shop after my baptism, but if I'm not actually going to be his apprentice, then I wonder what will happen to my guild card? Since it'll be after my baptism, I don't think they'll let me have a temporary registration. However, if I'm not attached to a shop, I won't be able to conduct any business without being registered.

"I don't know what kind of products you're planning on making, but how about we call the storehouse you've been using 'Maïne's Workshop', register you as the workshop head, and get you a card that way? If you enter into an exclusive production agreement with my shop, then our business won't be much different from how it is now."

"Workshop head?! That sounds kinda cool! If everything will be more or less the same as it is now, then yes, please, let's set it up like that."

I clap my hands excitedly, and Benno nods happily.

"So," I say, "this is something that I mentioned to Mister Mark, but we're going to be

restarting our paper making as soon as we can go look at the river's current condition. We're currently planning on the two of us making the paper until our baptisms, but after that Lutz will be busy with his apprenticeship and I won't be doing an apprenticeship at all, so I'm hoping that we'll be able to pass the entire task on to a workshop you select. Is that okay?"

"When you say the entire task, do you mean that you'll still be the one picking the workshop? Is that right?"

Our magic contract stipulated that Lutz and I would be able to have safe, stable employment at Benno's shop. Since this is turning into a new industry, I think the people and the workshop making it would be particularly important to Benno. For me, however, I won't have either salary or extra profit, so as long as a large amount of paper winds up in circulation, I don't particularly care who winds up making it.

"I mean, I don't know anything about workshops, and I also don't know anyone who might want to work on making paper. All I know is that since the process requires soaking tree bark in a river, it would probably be best for the workshop to be near the river, I think."

"Near the river, huh... that'll be difficult. How are you doing it now?"

Lutz shrugs. "Right now, we're carrying all of our equipment to the river bank in the forest, but doing that every day is really hard... oh, um, *difficult*, sir."

"If you think about scaling things up for mass production," I say, "then the equipment will need to be much bigger, so transporting it to the river will be next to impossible, I think? Well, thinking about that is probably a job for you, Mister Benno, or the people at the workshop."

"...Hmm, you're right."

Since it looks like Benno has understood, I'll just leave selecting a workshop and sourcing the tools to him.

"Please take care of selecting a workshop, getting the equipment, and finding suppliers for the materials before our baptisms. As the actual day of the ceremony gets closer, Lutz will go and instruct the workers in the actual manufacturing process."

"Me?!"

Lutz's eyes go wide, and he gapes like a fish. I smile sweetly, giving him a big nod.

"I mean, aren't there steps that I can't do myself? I think it would be best for you to show them how to do it in person. If after spending the entire spring doing it over and

over you're still uneasy about it, then I can go with you too, so you'll be fine!"

"You're really passing the *entire* task off, aren't you," says Benno, with an amused chuckle.

I glance guiltily to the side. I'm definitely well aware that I'm seriously shirking a lot of responsibility here. However, more than just making prototypes, improving distribution, and setting up mass production, I already want to be setting my sights on the next project. If I spend all my time fussing over the particulars of making paper, then I'll never actually get to making books, no matter how much time I spend. This spring, I want to make enough paper for me to use, and then turn my attention towards printing.

"Then, please excuse us."

With my heart full of my time-limited ambitions, I depart from Benno's office.



The next day, the fast-working Mark delivers new bamboo paper mats to our storehouse. Hearing that, Lutz takes the opportunity to check on the condition of the river when he heads to the forest for his gathering.

"Lutz, how'd it look? You think we can make paper?"

"There's a little more water flowing than usual from all the snow thawing, but not more than we'd get after a heavy rain, I think."

And, with that judgement, we officially resume making paper. First thing in the morning on the following day, Lutz fetches the key, then we immediately head off for the storehouse. As we walk along the alleyways, still cold enough that you need a coat, I spend my time thinking about the day's work.

To start with, when we get to the warehouse, we'll check to see if the outer bark we'd harvested from the tronbay back in the autumn and left out to dry is still alright. If it is, then we'll start by working on stripping that down to its inner bark. While that happens, I'd like to use the preserved folin inner bark to start making actual paper.

"I'd really like it if we could wait for the water to get a little warmer, though..." I say.

"Yeaah, you're right. But, if you keep in mind that we're trying to save up money, the sooner we start the better."

Benno's support for our paper-making enterprise is only going to last until the day of our baptismal ceremony. Until then, we want to do as much as we can to earn as much as possible.

"I wonder if the tronbay bark's going to be alright...?" I say, wondering aloud.

"That's been airing out this entire time, so it's probably going to be completely dried out by now."

"It wasn't drying in the sun, so I've been really worried about mold growing all over it!"

Since we left it alone all winter, it's only natural that it would have completely dried out by now, but whether or not it dried in a way that we actually want is another question entirely.

"There aren't really any molds that grow on tronbay," says Lutz.

He may be shrugging it off, but since we completely skipped the sun-drying part of the process altogether, I can't help but worry.

We arrive at the storehouse and unlock the door. With a creak, the door opens. Through the gloom and the dust, dark, wavy strips of material hang from the shelves like strands of seaweed, giving the entire place a supremely ominous air.

"Is it really going to be okay?" I ask.

"I think I'm a little worried now," Lutz replies.

I prod at a strip of outer bark, finding that it's completely dried out. Since the outer bark itself is dark, I can't really tell from the color alone whether or not it has mold growing on it.

"How about we bring these to the forest and try soaking them in the river for now?" I mutter to myself.

"What all are we going to bring to the forest today?" asks Lutz, sweeping dust off of the wooden box with back straps that he'd left in here.

"Umm... Lutz, how about you bring the pot and some ash? And, hm, I don't think we'll need something as big as a tub, but maybe we should bring a bucket as well. It would be kinda bad if we couldn't find any firewood in the forest, so maybe we should bring

some with us? I'll bring this outer bark and this preserved folin inner bark, and my 'chopsticks', too."

"I don't get why we need a bucket, but if you say we need it I'll bring it."

I gather up the dried tronbay outer bark and the folin inner bark from where we'd hung it in the warehouse, fetch the pair of cooking chopsticks Lutz had made for me, grab a few dust rags, and put it all in a basket. The two of us strap our supplies onto our back, and rush off to where the other children are meeting to get ready to go to the forest.

We all arrive at the forest, and as the other kids scatter about to go foraging, Lutz and I head for the riverbank. Lutz starts getting the pot ready right next to the river. He sets it down on a stove made of piled-up rocks, then uses the bucket to fill it up with river water.

"Oh," he says, "if we use this then we don't have to get soaked when we get water from the river. I knew you had a good reason!"

If you want to fill up the heavy pot with water directly from the river, then you've basically got no choice but to get in the river yourself. It seems like Lutz hadn't quite been thinking ahead that far.

Now that the pot's full of water, we use the firewood that we brought to get a fire started. While we wait for the water to boil, I want to start soaking the outer bark in the river, if possible.

"Wow, that looks cold," mutters Lutz, staring at the river, swollen with water from melting snow.

If we want to make sure that the bark doesn't wash away as it soaks, we need to build a circle of rocks to put it in. The one that we had made during the fall, however, has fallen apart, and only about half of it remains. Our first step thus has to be building a new stone circle.

"You can do it, Lutz!"

"Eek! Cold!!"

Lutz squawks as he wades into the river of ice water. If I were to go in myself, I'd almost certainly get another fever and my family would probably bar me from leaving the

house for a while, so basically the only thing I can be doing to help is to cheer him on.

For Lutz's sake, I walk around the area, gathering up fallen firewood. While I'm in the middle of that, though, he calls out for me.

"Maïne, bring the bark over!"

"On it~!"

As soon as the bark's in the circle, Lutz leaps out of the river, running to the stove to warm himself up with the fire. He holds his bright-red hands up to the fire, rubbing them vigorously together. I fill up the bucket with some warm water from the pot, then set it down in front of him.

"Put your hands and feet in here. If you don't warm them up, you'll get frostbite!"

"...Ah, warm... this feels great!"

He sticks his hands and feet into the bucket of warm water, heaving a sigh of relief. The hot water starts cooling down almost immediately, but thanks to that foot bath, it looks like his body's warming up a bit.

The pot has started gently simmering, so I add the ash and the white bark to it, stew it well, then get Lutz to put it in the river to rinse out the spare ash. Thanks to Lutz's hard work, even if it did seem like the freezing river had him on the verge of tears, our job for today is finished.

Chapter 60

Vested Interests

The next day, we need to bring in the bark from the river and strip the dark outer bark down to the light inner bark, so we bring the board, pot, and bucket with us. Sitting by the fire (and, occasionally, dipping our hands in the hot water to warm up), we use our knives to strip down the bark.

“I have to say it: I don’t want to be doing this when it’s not summer. My fingers are *completely* numb right now,” I say.

“You can say that again,” replies Lutz. “Going into the river is *awful*.”

As we grumble, we force ourselves to keep our hands steady, and work our way towards finishing up the tronbay inner bark. Even now that we’re stripping it down, I’m still not seeing any spots on it that look like it might be mold, so I let myself breathe a sigh of relief.

“...Doesn’t look like any mold grew on it after all. I’m glad!”

“I mean, the folin’s one thing, but didn’t I tell you that the tronbay was going to be okay?”

“It’s a pretty dangerous plant, huh?”

After we finish stripping the bark, we go foraging in the forest. Since it seems that there are a lot of medicinal plants that only grow during this season, Lutz and I go together, him teaching me as we go.

“Hey, Lutz. Why aren’t we picking up this red fruit here? Is it poisonous?”

I notice that Lutz avoids a fruit that hangs along our path as we walk past. It’s red, and about the size of the first knuckle of an adult’s thumb. I’d have to guess that this fruit is somehow dangerous. I point at it, careful not to touch it, and ask Lutz about it.

“Ahh, it’s better to just leave tau fruit alone. Basically, all that’s in there is water. You can’t eat it, so if you bring it home all it does is dry out, so there’s not really any use for them right now.”

“What do you mean, right now?”

“Oh, in the summer, they grow about as big as your fist, and when they hit something, they explode and send water everywhere, so then we all chuck them at each other.”

It seems like I should look at these as some sort of naturally-occurring water balloon. Since all it would do is wither if we brought it home, it seems like it would be best to leave it alone, otherwise it won't grow any bigger.

That's a weird fruit.

“All the kids and adults in the town come together and have a big fruit fight using these. Man, isn't the Star Festival great?”

I've been here at least a year, but I can't recall anything about this particular festival at all.

“...Hey, Lutz, I haven't heard anything about this Star Festival, though? It sounds like some sort of summer festival... thing?”

“Oh, around that time, you were basically dying, weren't you? I wanted to invite you, but your mom said your fever wasn't going down at all. I brought your bamboo strips around after that.”

Ahh, around then, huh?

Based on what he's saying, I can figure out which time in particular I was in the process of dying. My *mokkan* got burned up, which prompted the first episode in which I can clearly remember feeling like I was being swallowed alive by the devouring. Since it seems like I was totally unconscious for quite a few days, and stuck in bed for a while after that, even if there was a festival, going to it would have been completely out of the question. I'd guess that my family didn't go, either.

“Tuuli probably wanted to go, but I guess she didn't because of me, huh?”

I might be robbing Tuuli of her opportunities to make happy childhood memories! I hang my head as I think about that, but Lutz just shrugs, shaking his head.

“Nah, your mom stayed to keep an eye on you, so Tuuli got to participate. Ralph and I picked a lot of tau so that we could team up against her.”

“Oh, really? That's a relief.”

“It would be great if you could make it out this year, Maïne!”

“Yeah!”

I promise him that I’ll keep an eye on my health so I can participate in the Star Festival, and we finish up our foraging. Even though I made that promise, however, I have no idea whether or not my parents would allow me to participate in a festival that involved chucking water balloons at each other.

From the next day on, we work out of the warehouse. At this point it’s turned into work that we have to have warm water nearby to constantly warm up our hands in, but we get to work on making paper out of folin, using the new contract-sized bamboo paper mats. As we let that paper dry over the course of a few days, we start working on making paper out of the tronbay inner bark.

“The folin paper’s pretty dry, now. I think it’s because today was super clear.”

“The tronbay paper should be dry after tomorrow, maybe?”

As I check on the manufacturing process, I take the twenty-six sheets of folin paper and split them evenly with Lutz. As he takes his thirteen sheets from me, he frowns, troubled.

“Hey, Maïne. Why are you splitting it up here? Isn’t it just fine to split up the money after we’ve brought all of the paper to Master Benno?”

“I mean, what I really want is the actual finished product. It would be wrong for me to keep paper that Benno bought us the materials for, it’s okay for me to keep the stuff that we made from materials we gathered ourselves, right?”

If I were to sell paper to Benno and then buy it back, he’d take his 30% commission off the top. In that case, it’s better for me to just not sell it to him in the first place.

“So you’re not going to sell any?”

“I’ll sell just half of it. I’m gathering paper so that I can make a book!”

Now that we’ve not just established the proper formula but have also started growing increasingly familiar with the actual manufacturing process, our success rate is starting to increase, meaning that we’re producing fewer and fewer failures. That makes my end goal of making a book more complicated. My mother has told me so many stories by now that recording all of them is going to be a huge task.

After completing our work, we immediately head to Benno's shop to bring him our finished paper, bringing the key to the warehouse along with us.

"Oh, it's done?"

Benno takes the two stacks of folin paper from Lutz and I, then counts them. Lutz's stack has thirteen sheets, and mine has six. He frowns, noticing the blatant difference in number.

"Maïne, you've got way less in here. Why's that?"

"Because what I ultimately want is the paper, I've kept some for myself. Of course, this wouldn't be paper made from materials for which you paid, but from materials we gathered ourselves; that should be alright, is it not?"

"...Hm, sure. I don't particularly care about what you do with your own materials, but what exactly are you going to be using all that paper for?"

He wears a slightly guarded expression as he asks me that question.

"I'm going to be making a book. That's why I want paper."

"A book?... Why're you making one of those? To sell?"

"Huh? I just want one to read myself, though...?"

Benno and I exchange strange looks, collectively tilting our heads to the side. There's no way that Benno, who can't comprehend using such a high-value good as paper to make something not for sale, and I, who just wants a book and doesn't actually care about the material value, could understand each other.

"Well, whatever. Paper this size will sell for one large silver coin. My commission is thirty percent, so, how much is your share?"

Lutz doesn't really understand percentages yet. As he stammers, frantically trying to work out the math, I quickly respond with the correct answer.

"Seven small silver coins, sir."

"*What?!*" yells Lutz. "Seven small silver coins?! Wh... th... that's too much, isn't it?!"

Lutz, upon hearing a number so completely beyond his expectations, gapes at me in sheer shock.

“...Lutz, calm down. I know it sounds like a lot of money for us to be earning, but we’re only going to be seeing profits for this until our baptismal ceremonies, you know? If you think about how much money Mister Benno is going to be making off of this paper from now on, this is really a pretty tiny amount, so don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about it? You...”

I’d tried to calm him down, but his eyes start rolling around in his head in pure uncomprehending shock.

“Since you’re selling thirteen sheets,” I say to him, “you’ll be getting nine large and one small silver coins. I’m selling six, so I’ll get four large and two small silver coins.”

“Uh, when you say ‘nine large silver coins’ there’s no way I can hear that and think that’s a ‘pretty tiny amount’, right?”

“Hm? Then, should we reduce the selling price?”

I incline my head slightly to the side in doubt, looking at Lutz as he seems to be paralyzed with fear, as I make my suggestion. However, Benno, still sitting in front of us, smiles at us wryly, shaking his head while he rejects our suggestion.

“We can’t sell it for any lower. We’d just be creating needless strife with some people who have vested interests in the field. Let’s keep it at the same price for now. When this starts actually circulating around the market, I’ll start thinking about changing the selling price. Hey, if you’re scared of that much money, how about I increase my commission?”

That last bit he aimed directly at Lutz, grinning broadly.

“We don’t have any say in how much it gets sold for,” I say, “so we’ll leave determining the actual sale price to you, Mister Benno, but I won’t agree to any change to your commission. Hey, Lutz. If you don’t need that money, how about you give it to me?”

“As if I’d give it to either of you!” he yells. “I was just a little shocked at how much money it was, that’s all!”

Lutz clutches his guild card tightly to his chest. Since guild cards are bound to their owner by blood, it’s impossible for anyone but the actual owner to use them. It’s a perfectly safe place to keep your money.

“If you store it with the guild, then you don’t have to look at the cash itself, so it’s not so scary, is it?”

“Crap, I’m kinda jealous how weirdly shameless you are about all this, Maine.”

“Whoa, shameless?! That’s meaaan!”

In my Urano days, I saved my money in the bank. Then, in this world, I’d earned entire small gold coins, and then spent basically all of them paying for that magic tool, so I guess I’m just pretty used to the movement of large sums of money by now. There’s no way I’m being *shameless* about it.

As I sulk, I reach out to tap guild cards with a broadly grinning Benno, settling our accounts. I get five large copper coins in cash from him to bring back to my family. Lutz does the same, getting some coins for his family, and we finish up our transactions.



A few days later, when Lutz goes to retrieve the key for the warehouse, he comes back carrying a letter and a fairly large package. More accurately, it’s not a letter, but a wooden board upon which an invitation has been written. In the package are a couple hooded coats, designed to be pulled on over the head like some kind of poncho.

“What are these?” asks Lutz, frowning at his differently-colored poncho.

I look over our written invitation. It succinctly lists the time, place, and reason for the meeting.

“It says that we’re to meet in the central plaza at the fourth bell for the purpose of purchasing clothing,” I say.

“Huh? Clothes?”

“...It says that there are people who have come to voice objections to the paper we’ve made. While the sender of the invitation wants to meet with them to discuss a possible resolution, it seems that it would be best for us to not stand out so that our existence doesn’t become known. Since our appearances don’t blend in at the shop, we’re to wear these when we go to meet with the sender.”

“Uh? What the heck is this?! This sounds really dangerous, right?”

The two of us slip the ponchos on over our heads to try them on. They’re very warm, and cover our clothing entirely. For now, it seems that it’s best to cover up our raggedy clothing. When we raise the hoods, both our hair and our faces are hidden, so when we’re walking around we should keep them up. My hairpin, it seems, is very conspicuous.

"I don't know whether or not it's actually dangerous, but since we're going to be meeting Mister Mark, how about we make sure we bring in the tronbay paper beforehand so that we can sell it while we're at it? Oh, although, maybe it would be better if we weren't weren't walking around with it when we were just told we shouldn't stand out?"

I start checking on the state of the tronbay paper, but Lutz suddenly gets really mad.

"Maïne, why're you so relaxed about this?!"

"Huh? I mean, I basically already expected that a new product like this would run against someone else's vested interests. I guess it's a little sooner than I would have thought, though..."

"'Vested interests'?"

Lutz frowns, repeating the unfamiliar term.

"Some person (or people) who already have rights to earn profits from something. Mister Benno mentioned it yesterday, you know? That if we lowered the prices we'd be creating strife. If I had to guess, this time it's the people who make parchment."

"What do the parchment makers have to do with it? Our paper is made from wood, so they're not related at all, right?"

If you just look at the manufacturing process, they're completely unrelated, but both the end use and the level of the clientele are exactly the same. Until now, there was nothing at all that could threaten the parchment makers' profits, so the sudden appearance of a previously unknown kind of paper has probably sent them into a panic, I think.

"Ummm, so, if nobody but them could make any sort of paper, then no matter how expensive they made it, everyone would still have no choice but to buy parchment if they wanted to write contracts, you know? But, if a new kind of paper showed up, then that new paper could steal some of their existing customers, see?"

"Ahh, I guess you're right."

Lutz nods, seeming to understand. If a new product that's good for the same thing appears, then of course some customers would be drawn away towards the new thing.

"If that's the case, then they couldn't take in the same proceeds, you know? And they

wouldn't like that. Plus, if we got to the point where we could sell a lot of paper, then the sale price would start going down, too."

"Huh, really?"

I draw a graph on my slate. I mark two lines for the X and Y axes, then draw two intersecting curves as simple representations of supply and demand, and then start to explain their connection.

"So, this graph shows how '*supply*' and '*demand*' are connected. This line's the '*supply curve*', and this one's the '*demand curve*'. '*Supply*' is the amount of a good exists, and '*demand*' is the number of people wanting to buy it."

"Ahh," he replies.

"If there's lots of people who want to buy a good, and there's not enough of it on the market to sell, then the price of that good goes up."

As I explain the importance of the left side of the two curves, he seems to understand. "Ah, if there's a shortage you can charge as much as you want," he murmurs.

"Then, as more of the good is able to be sold, then the people who want it can start buying it, and then you're left with fewer people who want it, you know? So then, the price starts to go down."

As I explain, I slide my finger along the curves, until I reach the intersection point in the middle.

"If there's more goods available than people who want to buy it, then no matter how much of it you put out for sale you won't actually be able to sell it, you know? In that case, then the price will just get lower and lower, right?"

As I keep dragging my finger right, the supply and demand curve completely switch places on the Y-axis.

"Do you get it? Just because of the fact that we're able to make paper, prices are going to start dropping. Since the parchment makers aren't going to want to reduce the price of parchment, and they want to maintain the same amount of profit that they had before, they had to voice objections over a new kind of paper entering the market."

"Hey, isn't that really bad, though?" he asks, anxiously.

I shake my head, smiling. "Since Mister Benno's telling us to keep ourselves hidden, what he's really saying is that it's okay to leave taking these people on to him. It'll be

fine, don't worry about it.... Although I don't know exactly what's going on since I haven't been told about it in any detail."

By the time our meeting time comes around, we're able to finish twenty-four sheets of tronbay paper, but since we're waiting to see what the actual plan is, we leave it behind in the storehouse.

"Lutz, put your hood up too, for now, so that way they won't be able to recognize your face or your hair color."

The fact that Benno went as far as to send us clothes to wear means that there's no way that there's zero chance we might get caught up in something dangerous. As we nervously wait in the central plaza, the fourth bell rings, and Mark comes to meet us.

"Thank you for waiting," he says. "As promised, shall we go acquire the clothing you'll need as apprentices?"

"Yes please, Mister Mark."

Since I'm not going to become an apprentice, I don't actually need the clothes, but if I'm going to be coming and going from Benno's shop, then it might be a good idea for me to have clothing that won't stand out. I contemplate whether or not this is actually a waste of money as we walk, leading Mark to mistakenly believe that I might not be in peak form and scoop me up into his arms.

"I can walk on my own?!" I protest.

"Ah; I had heard you moaning, so I had merely grown somewhat anxious. Please, for the sake of my own peace of mind, let me carry you."

"I was just thinking while I walked. There's nothing wrong with my health!"

His smile not faltering in the least, Mark speeds up his pace just a little bit. It seems like he's of a mind to completely ignore any of my arguments.

"Then, please feel free to think to your heart's content."

"Luuutz!" I whine.

"This'll be way faster, so stay like that," he says.

With my plea for Lutz's help struck down so firmly, I cease my struggling.

Grr, why do I feel like I'm surrounded by my enemies!



The three of us enter a clothing store, and the shopkeeper comes out to greet us with a smile. Both the employees and the clients here are all dressed sharply in elegant clothing. If Lutz and I had come to a store like this on our own, we'd have been shooed away immediately.

"Oh my, if it isn't Mister Mark? Welcome! Are these new apprentices?"

"Yes, that's right. I'd like to place an order for two sets of clothing, if you would."

This may be the shop that Mark buys all of the apprentices' clothing from, as with just that brief request the shopkeeper smiles and nods.

"Huh?" I say. "Two sets... is that one for me, too?"

Lutz, of course, needs a set, but I'm certainly not becoming an apprentice. However, Mark simply nods, his smile as polite and constant as ever.

"When you come and go from the shop looking like you do now, no matter what you do you wind up standing out. I'm terribly sorry, but I'll still be having clothing prepared for you as well. Even if you won't be working as an apprentice, you will still be visiting our shop, so I think it will be handy for you to have at least one set of clothes for yourself."

"...You're right, I guess."

I'm not going to be an apprentice, but since I'm going to be working on developing new goods and am going to need to consult with Benno about both my earnings as well as whatever work he gives me to do at home, it's likely that the frequency with which I visit the shop won't actually change much from where we are now. Even worse, next to Lutz's pristine apprentices' garb, my worn-out clothes will just look all the more pitiful. Since I have some cash to spare right now, it might indeed be best for me to have some clothes made.

Lutz is pulled deeper into the shop ahead of me, stripped down to his underwear, and measured all over. I'm pulled into a different room, and stripped down as well. Even just after having all sorts of measurements taken here and there, I'm left extremely worn out.

"The advance fee will be one small silver coin."

“Alright,” I reply.

We order everything apprentices need to wear, from top to bottom, including shoes, then use our guild cards to pay them one small silver coin. Just like Benno had said, the final total will be a little less than ten small silver coins. With that, it seems we’ll have a complete set of apprentices’ clothes.

After we finish our clothing order, Mark leads us to Benno’s shop. There, we find Benno staring at our paper with a bit of a glare, but when he sees the two of us, his expression softens.

“Ah, you’re here? It looks like things have gotten somewhat bothersome, so I’m being vigilant, even if I wonder if I might be going a little overboard. You two, be as vigilant as you can, too. Don’t let your guard down. These people could be anywhere, and I have no idea what they’ll do now that their interests are at stake.”

It seems like Benno’s being a little overcautious, but he just tells us not to be unprepared for people whose interests we’re affecting. Since the two of us are still unbaptized children, he adds, if we’re wearing apprentices’ clothes, then he thinks we shouldn’t draw anyone’s attention, even if we’re loitering around the shop.

“You’d written ‘vested interests’ on that board; so is this the parchment makers, then?”
“That’s right. The parchment makers’ association has filed a complaint with the merchant’s guild, it seems.”

“With the merchant’s guild?”

I tilt my head to one side, not exactly certain what the relation between the parchment makers’ association and the merchant’s guild could be. Benno gives a simple explanation of how the guild’s jobs includes protecting vested interests, resolving strife caused by new enterprises, and mediating disputes.

“It seems that the complaint they lodged last evening was that there’s someone making paper who wasn’t a member of the parchment makers’ association and wasn’t paying them their dues. They contacted me, demanding to manage our activities, saying we’re outlaws arbitrarily doing things of our own accord.”

“Huh,” I say, “and then?”

There’s no way that Benno would just quietly lie down and give up. He’d probably try to find some point of compromise. When I, completely unconcerned, prompt him to

continue, a triumphant, predatory smile spreads across his face.

“I immediately refused. I told them that since this isn’t paper made from animal skin, the parchment makers’ association has nothing to do with it, and that they should get out of my face.”

The blood drains from my face when I see how excessively belligerent Benno’s being. If he could find some sort of compromise, then he wouldn’t have to fight with them over sales at all, would he?

“Huh? Ummm, so you didn’t try to compromise or negotiate, then?”

“Idiot. If I start acting all modest from the beginning, they’re not going to take me seriously, you know? The reality of it is that we’re not stealing any of their manufacturing methods, so they can’t charge us any sort of technical fee. There’s no way you can make plant-based paper using a process designed for making paper out of animal skin, so there’s no real hierarchy here. What these guys *really* want to do is have a monopoly on everything paper-related at all and, if they can, steal our profits for themselves.”

It looks like I’ve got my way of doing things and Benno’s got his, so even if I try to object it looks like nothing will come of it, but I wonder if there’s a way we could handle things a bit more peaceably?

“Ummm, I think that since parchment’s made of paper, they won’t be able to suddenly increase their production. If the guild’s going to be intermediating, then perhaps they could restrict the kind of paper they could use for official contracts to parchment only? If you’d agree to that, then they’d still mostly keep their existing market and their existing products; how about that?”

“You’re as soft as ever, kid.”

Benno snorts derisively. I wonder if he thinks that guaranteeing them their existing clientele and profits by letting all official contracts be written on parchment would just be quietly rolling over? I wonder if this might just not work.

“I just don’t like doing pointless things,” I say. “Besides, what I really want is to increase the circulation of paper so that lots of people can do new things with it. I want to see books, notepads, paintings, paper art... I want it to be something that people will even let kids use.”

“That’s... a much grander dream than I expected,” he murmurs, his eyes open with

amazement.

“Huh? You think it’s grand? I’ve been thinking that if we could just make a lot of paper, then we could make it happen. That’s why I think that if we want to be bold and sell folin paper at a way lower price than parchment, then as long as people are using it for things besides writing contracts, then it should be fine, shouldn’t it? For instance, look at that report. If that was written on paper, then it would be easier to carry, and easier to store, too. And it’s way easier to write on than boards...”

“I see, you want to differentiate the *use* of different kinds of paper, huh... I’ll try proposing that.”

This time he doesn’t tell me that I’m being soft, but instead gives me a scheming sort of smile. It seems like I might have actually tickled the profit-seeking center of his brain.

“If we’re differentiating between kinds of paper,” I continue, “then how about we treat tronbay paper as a high-grade good? To be honest, I think it’s a much higher-quality product than parchment.”

“You’re right. I’ve already been planning on selling it at a *much* higher price than parchment.”

“Huh? Much higher?”

I look at him with wide eyes, wondering if he might have misspoken. Benno, on the other hand, narrows his eyes, looking back and forth between me and Lutz, scrutinizing us.

“...Did the two of you just not notice?”

“Huh? Notice... what?”

“Lutz, what are the special properties of tronbay?”

Lutz jumps, startled by the sudden question, then starts listing off the various characteristics of tronbay as they come to mind.

“Huh? Properties? Well, it sucks up all of the nutrients from the surrounding soil, it grows *really* quickly, it’s hard to burn—”

“Ah!” I interject, “is that it!... Is paper made from tronbay hard to burn?”

Come to think of it, my father said that furniture made from tronbay is fire resistant, to the point where it’s often left standing after a big fire. The young, soft wood isn’t useful for making furniture, he said, so we made paper out of it.

“Yeah, that’s right. Compared to ordinary paper, it’s extremely hard to burn. Of course, it isn’t completely impossible to burn it, but it’s still an excellent paper for writing national secrets or national public records. Something like a hard-to-burn paper will sell for a very high price indeed.”

That’s certainly a special kind of paper, so of course it would sell for a high price. Even in Japan, it’s not like all kinds of paper cost the same. If it took a lot of labor to make, if it’s made out of something rare, or if it’s otherwise somehow special, then a single sheet could sell for an astonishingly high price indeed.

“I understand,” I say. “...Then, how much would a sheet of tronbay paper sell for?”

“For a contract-sized sheet, I’ll be selling them for five large silver coins each.”

“Whoa...”

The enormously huge price he’s assigned to it gives me a sudden headache, while Lutz is so shocked that he can’t even say anything, but Benno merely says, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world, that “it’s a fire-resistant paper made from a hard-to-find material, that’s why.”

“So, then,” he says, “until negotiations with the parchment makers’ association have finished, don’t show your face around the shop for a while. I’ve got a good reason for why I don’t want you two to be seen. Specifically, if your paper-making method were to leak and start spreading around, we’re going to start seeing corpses.”

“Uh.”

I stand there, blinking, shocked by how quickly the conversation turned grim. Benno then starts reminding me of some things about the contract magic that I’d completely forgotten about.

“According to our magical contract, the individual who decides who can manufacture paper is you, Maïne, and the individual who determines who can sell it is you, Lutz. If someone who doesn’t know anything about this contract tries making or selling paper on their own, I have no idea what might wind up happening.”

“*Whaaat?! Contract magic is that dangerous?! It even affects people who don’t know anything about it?*”

This completely unforeseen development has me reeling. I hadn’t even considered that the magical contract that guaranteed us safe employment would have such an

incredibly dangerous function to it.

“It’s meant to guarantee the rights of people who deal with the nobility, right? Even if the person who violates it has no knowledge about the contract at all, some kind of punishment will still be handed down. That’s why I want to keep your existences a secret, declare to the merchant’s guild that I have a magical contract saying that my shop makes and sells the paper, and thus keep the parchment makers’ association in check.”

Perhaps I shouldn’t be calling this magical contract something that secures our employment, but something that puts us in incredible danger. It declares that I hold the sole right to determine who is able to make plant-based paper and Lutz holds the sole right to sell it, and that, in reality, puts us in a really dangerous situation, doesn’t it?

“I’d like to keep it a secret that you two are the ones who control who can sell it. I’ll leave the key to the storehouse with you, so don’t come around here for a while. When I’m done with my negotiations, I’ll contact you through Otto.”

Benno, appearing as trustworthy as ever, says this to us, and Lutz and I nod in agreement.

Chapter 61

Result of the Meetings with the Vested Interests

Thanks to the magical contract I signed, wishing for a stable future, people might start dying.

Benno's words have me terrified. There's no way I would have wanted to put other people in harms way just so that Lutz and I could secure our future employment. Trembling and shivering, I walk home with Lutz. There's a pit in my stomach, like I'd swallowed a chunk of lead, and it churns within me.

"You don't have to worry so much," says Lutz. "It'll be okay. Master Benno's taking care of it."

I nod at Lutz as he tries to reassure me, but after I get home, I start thinking about how people I might not know might start dying and how we might face some kind of punishment, and all I can do is worry and worry. My stomach ties itself in a knot.

If you were to ask me what's so scary, it's dragging completely unknowing outsiders into this.

What I really want to do is lock myself in my house, but Lutz practically drags me out of the house, telling me that staring blankly at the wall made me look like I was thinking some strange thoughts. We keep working on making paper and keep going to the forest, but apart from that the only thing we can do is wait to hear back from Benno. However, even after a few days, no matter how many times we've passed through the gates on our way to and from the forest, we haven't heard a single thing from Otto. I haven't heard anyone talking about any mysterious deaths, either. Everything seems to be basically the same as it always has been.

As even more time passes, my fear starts to be replaced by suspicion. Would people *really* start turning up dead? Couldn't Benno have just been exaggerating? Thinking along those lines, I try to recall exactly what he said, and what his facial expression and attitude had been like.

“...If you think about it, it’s kinda weird, right?” I say.

“What is?” replies Lutz, furrowing his eyebrows. He peels a fresh, wet sheet of paper off of the bamboo mat and spreads it out on the paper bed.

“The fact that contract magic can affect people who don’t know about it,” I remind him.

“Why?” he replies, in a casual tone of voice. “It’s magic, isn’t it supposed to be mysterious?” He finishes laying down his sheet of paper, and I start working on mine.

“I think it’s kinda weird that magic is supposed to be mysterious. Or, rather, what if someone writes contract magic about some basic technique or some wide-spread commodity? Wouldn’t there be fallout from that everywhere? And if it was used in a faraway city, then there’s no way we’d ever hear about it in this city, too...”

“Huh, I guess you’re right.”

I continue thinking about it as I spread pulp over my paper mat. If contract magic were used as some kind of patent enforcement system, then that means there would need to be some kind of patent office controlling it. It would be dangerous to the public if nobody knew whether or not a particular product was protected by contract magic.

“And, *because* we don’t know about it, I’m thinking that there have to be limits to the range or the effects of contract magic. Besides, wouldn’t there be much stricter protection in place around the use of such a dangerous kind of magic?”

“You’re kind of talking in circles around it, but, really, you’re anxious, aren’t you?”

“Anxious...”

I unintentionally freeze up when he says that. Lutz, sitting next to me, takes the bamboo mat from me and keeps working.

“When you’re trying to hide what you’re really feeling from yourself, you always start talking a lot,” he says. He lifts his chin a tiny bit, then urges me on, saying, “if you keep it all down I won’t understand any of it, so just spit it all out already.”

“...I’m scared that people who don’t know about our magic contract might get put into danger. I want to think that Mister Benno was joking or even lying to us. Like, nobody’s in danger right now, right? He just wanted to scare us, right?... That’s what I want to be thinking.”

“Well, if he is joking, what’s the point? What does he get out of deceiving us?”

“Urgh... I, I mean, before now he’s deceived us a lot. I’m thinking that maybe he’s trying to cheat us, or maybe he’s keeping secrets, or maybe this is some kind of test.”

As I wonder aloud why Benno could be trying to keep us away, I suddenly hear a very

familiar voice come from behind me.

“Hm? You mean to tell me you don’t trust Benno, Maïne?”

Having thought that there was nobody else in the workshop but the two of us, Lutz and I instantly snap our heads around to see who we had just heard.

“Mister Otto?!”

“Why’re you here?!”

Otto waves at us, eyebrows raised in an expression of mild surprise. He’s dressed in civilian clothes.

“I’m here to deliver a message from Benno, remember?”

“A message?!”

Certainly, Benno had said that he’d contact us through Otto, but I’d thought that would have involved flagging us down when we passed through the gates. I certainly didn’t think he’d just show up at our storehouse like this.

“It’s finally done, he said.”

Such a simple message doesn’t tell me anything. I, who suffered through a constantly churning stomach as the result of a lack of information, immediately jump on him, pressing for details.

“*What’s* finally done? *How’d* it get done?!”

“It seems there were some difficulties with it.”

“Some difficulties? What happened?!”

Otto merely shrugs, refusing to give any sort of answer that actually answered anything. I have no idea if he actually doesn’t know what’s happening or if he’s merely pretending not to.

“Benno didn’t explain anything to you?” he asks.

“He didn’t tell me much. I know that if people who don’t know about our magic contract make or sell paper on their own then something bad will happen, and that he doesn’t want us to come around the shop until he’s done with his negotiations with the parchment makers’ association, since he wants to keep our manufacturing

methods hidden. That's all."

As I explain what little Benno had told me, Otto gently strokes his chin.

"Hmm, so he's told you the barest minimum amount for now, hasn't he?"

"Our contract hasn't done any damage to any unknown people, has it? That's the thing I'm most worried about..."

"He kept your manufacturing methods hidden so that wouldn't happen, didn't he? There really hasn't been any damage. Anything more than that you should probably ask Benno about. When you get to a good stopping point, how about we go there together?"

"Okay!"

Hearing that nobody's been hurt takes an enormous weight off my chest. With my body suddenly feeling much lighter, I diligently go back to spreading pulp over the paper frame.

"Ah, so is this how you make paper? What's this thing here?"

"A trade secret."

"This syrupy sort of goo, what's it made of?"

"Trade secrets."

Even though Otto seems very interested in how paper actually gets made, I refuse to answer any of his many questions as I continue my work.

"We've got a great working relationship, Maïne. It's alright to tell me about this stuff, isn't it?"

"Mister Benno will get mad at me if I start carelessly telling you everything. Right, Lutz?"

I pass the conversation on to Lutz, who smiles, shrugging.

"Right, because you never think, you always just start talking. You should probably keep your mouth shut."

"Ahaha..." chuckles Otto. "Talking without thinking? I can imagine how thick the vein popping out of his forehead gets when that happens."

"Oh, his veins don't pop out that often. He usually just gets really, *really* shocked."

After we tidy up our tools, the three of us head towards Benno's shop. As we walk

through the alleys, Otto, faster than we are, pulls ahead. He stops, then looks down at me, rubbing his temples.

“...Do you *usually* walk this slowly?”

“...Yes...?”

“Whoa, you’re amazing, Lutz. You’re way more patient than I am. I respect that!... Anyhow, pardon me.”

“Whoa!”

Otto, confessing his own impatience, abruptly picks me up, then starts walking briskly forward. Now that I think about it, recently, both Benno and Mark have insisted on carrying me every time. It seems that, somehow, my walking speed is so slow that adults can’t help but feel like they absolutely have to carry me around. This is kind of a shock.

When we arrive at Benno’s shop, Mark comes out to greet us.

“Maïne, Lutz, good afternoon. Master Otto, you have my deepest gratitude for everything you have done for us.” He bows to Otto.

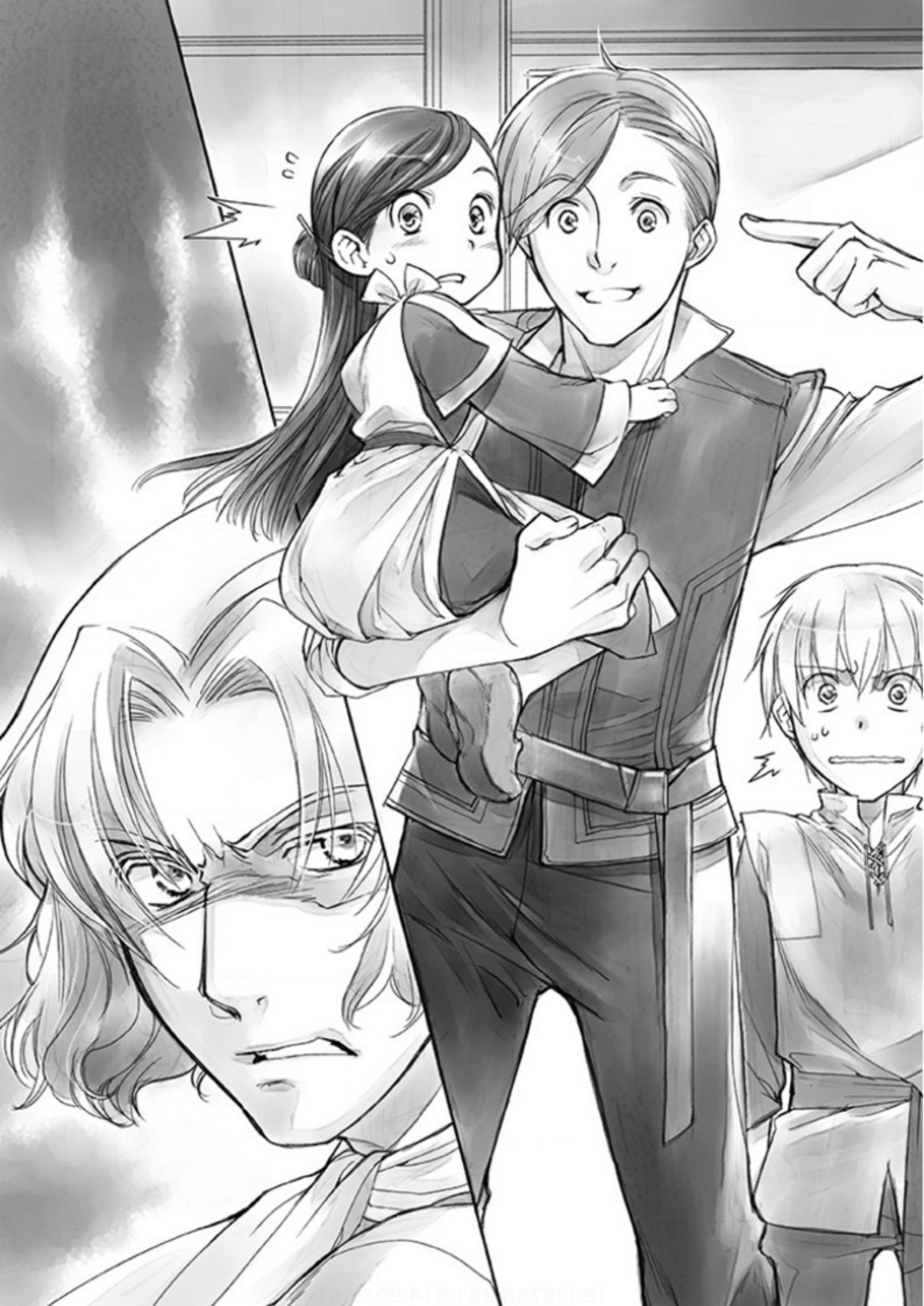
“It wasn’t a big deal,” replies Otto, offhandedly. “It was actually pretty fun! Is Benno in?”

He immediately heads inside. Still holding me in one hand, he uses his other hand to push open the door to the back room.

“Benno, the water goddess has arrived!”

The instant Otto enters, saying something strange, Benno immediately shoots him a glare, a bloodthirsty gleam in his eyes. The sheer intensity of Benno’s glare is such that I, still carried in Otto’s arms, am hit by the shockwave.

“Shut up, Otto. You don’t want Corinna to divorce you, do you?”



It seems that Benno, as Corinna's substitute father, might have the authority to force the two of them to get a divorce. Otto's basically his son-in-law, then, so it seems Benno's something like the head of the family.

I'm not the only one who puts Benno's sharp glare and his low growl together and realizes how serious he really is. Otto, who's built his entire life revolving around Corinna, frantically starts apologizing.

"Whoa! No way! That was a little joke, you know?!"

"It's not a joke if it's not actually funny."

Benno, wearing an expression such that I can't quite tell if he's joking or serious, starts reaching out as if to crush Otto's skull. I, suddenly scared of being dropped, would like this to stop.

"Mister Benno, what seems to have you in such a bad mood?"

"It's *this* asshole's fault."

Although Benno scowls at him, Otto doesn't seem to act like he cares that much as he sets me down on the floor.

"Benno," he says, "looks like Maïne doesn't trust you! I caught her grumbling about you a little while ago. She was worried you might be deceiving her, keeping secrets from her, or even testing her, she said."

I'm pretty sure he knows exactly how angry Benno is. He's absolutely saying something unnecessary right now. I have no doubt that he's saying these things *because* Benno's mad.

"Mister Otto," I object, "don't say that!"

I'm positive that Otto's words will only make Benno's mood worse, so I worriedly look over to see how Benno's reacting. However, instead of seeming any angrier, Benno just looks down at me, then lets out an exhausted sigh.

"Haahhh... are you getting too perceptive? Or maybe just too doubtful? Or maybe you just have a bad personality? I've been doing all of this hard, pain-in-the-ass work for you, and all I needed you to do was to just stay away and be quiet, and still..."

"But," interjects Otto, "not just blindly swallowing whatever someone tells you is a

very important skill for a merchant to have, so trying to figure out the real meaning behind their words and actions is the right thing to do!"

He gives me a big grin and a thumbs-up.

"Well, whatever," says Benno. "I'll answer your questions. Sit."

We sit down at our usual table, facing each other and, with the very first words out of my mouth, I ask Benno about the thing that I'm most worried about.

"Can contract magic *really* affect uninvolved people?"

"Based on what's written in it, yeah, it's happened before. This time, if we're not careful, it could happen again. I explained this to you already, right?"

Certainly, he had said that. He'd explained it, but I just hadn't accepted it.

"But, if it were used for some basic craft, or some product or technique that's already wide-spread, wouldn't there be all sorts of damage everywhere? If someone were to write a magic contract in some far-off country, then we'd have no way of knowing about it at all... there's got to be some sort of limit on its effects, or a maximum range, isn't there? Also, shouldn't there be some sort of control on the use of magic contracts, or something like that..."

Benno nods, looking slightly amazed as I lay out my thoughts.

"Yeah, magic contracts only really work in the city they were signed in. Small-scale magics that happen inside the city can't make it out of the magical barrier built into the walls around it."

"Magical barrier?! Whoa, what's that?!"

The mention of a previously-unheard fantasy setting term sets my heart alight, and I instinctively lean forward and start asking for more information, but all I earn is another glare from Benno.

"It's the foundation of a town, but that doesn't matter right now. So, are we all done with questions and explanations for today?"

"Ahh, no, wait! So if contract magic can affect people who don't know about it, then that's really dangerous, isn't it? It's weird to just be able to casually use it for whatever, isn't it?"

Benno raises one eyebrow, looking a little uncomfortable, and stares at me.

“No, you can’t just ‘casually use it for whatever’. The magical tools you need for it are given only to specifically approved merchants, and they’re so expensive your eyes would pop out of your head if I told you. And also, like you thought, contracts that can affect people besides the signatories absolutely must be declared to the lord of the land. If any damage were to happen *without* us declaring it, then we’d be the ones who get punished.”

“Huh? Then...”

The instant I start to panic about forgetting to declare the contract and damage happening, Benno flicks my forehead.

“Gyah!”

“Don’t misunderstand. I told the lord of the land about this a long time ago.”

He guessed what I was going to say before I could even open my mouth. As I groan, rubbing my forehead, Benno snorts, the corners of his mouth turning up in a triumphant grin.

“And, when I declared the contract, I was told that I needed to inform the merchant’s guild that I had signed a magical contract relating to a new commodity, and register it with them.”

“...So in other words, you declared it to the guild as well?”

“Of course I went! I declared it and registered it. Then, I went to get approval to start a new trade association.”

“What?”

Start a new trade association? What does he plan to do? Isn’t he doing something incredibly over-the-top?

Hearing those unexpected words, my eyes widen in surprise and I tilt my head to one side. Seeing this, Benno puffs up his chest, looking extremely self-satisfied.

“Plant-based paper is something that could turn into an enormous enterprise, right? So, I went to start a papermakers’ association, like the parchment makers’ association, so I can spread my business wide, even to other cities.”

“...This is news to me, though?”

Stunned, my face freezes. Benno nods emphatically.

“It’s the first time I’m telling you.”

“W... wait a minute. So that means, you were planning on competing with the parchment makers right from the beginning weren’t you?! You never wanted to have a peaceful talk with them at all!”

Why he’d race straight towards such a stubborn conclusion, I have no idea. I can’t see any room for laying any groundwork, making concessions, or finding any points of compromise anywhere in there.

“It’s not *my* fault that it didn’t end nice and quietly. It’s that old bastard’s fault.”

“Are you just shifting the blame?” I reply.

As Benno glares at me, growling, Otto, sitting next to him, starts laughing uproariously, clutching his sides. I have no idea just how *that* got set off, but Benno and I just glance at him, mutually deciding to leave him alone.

“I’m not shifting the blame. I went to the merchant’s guild to get everything declared, but because I didn’t have any of the actual product on hand when the contract was signed, I was told that I couldn’t actually register it. So, when the prototype was finished, I went again to go register it.”

“Ah...”

“But, the guild master decided he didn’t like the idea of me registering a new trade association, so he gave me this long-winded speech, and then even though I got my application in, it seems like it’s *still* not done being processed, even though the seasons have already changed entirely.”

Come to think of it, back when Lutz and I went to get our temporary registrations, the guild master interfered with that too. He eventually allowed us to be registered, since he wanted to be able to do business with me for a hairpin, but I remember him being extremely reluctant about that.

“That happened before, when Lutz and I needed temporary registrations, but could the guild master hold back your registration or reject it for totally personal reasons?”

“If he could come up with some plausible pretext for it. Remember, when we got you registered, his reason was that you weren’t my blood relatives, right? *This* time, he said he felt like the parchment makers’ association already was a paper organization, so

there wasn't a need to make another association solely for plant-based paper."

Judging by the deeply unpleasant expression on Benno's face, he must be reliving the mood he'd been in during his meeting with the guild master. I feel like it must have been a dangerous struggle, with the guild master constantly finding fault with him.

"I can imagine how that discussion went," I say.

"I'd filed my application back in the autumn, so I started selling paper now thinking that there's no way I still wouldn't actually be registered. It's obvious that I wasn't cautious *enough*, but do you really think I'm shifting the blame here?"

He glares at me, and I frantically shake my head.

"Ummm, no, I think it's the guild master's fault for procrastinating."

"That's right. So, when I sold paper without that registration, then the parchment makers' guild went to lodge a complaint. But that old bastard played it totally innocent, and then he even started by siding entirely with the other guys..."

It's looking more and more like Benno's rival isn't actually the parchment makers' association. It's the guild master.

"So, the magic contract still isn't done being registered, even though the lord of the land himself told me to go do it. If something bad were to happen to some unknown person because of that, then what do you think would happen?"

Failing to register after being explicitly told to would either leave an extremely bad impression or be treated as an outright felony, I think.

"I think the lord of the land would get very angry," I say.

"Yeah. He'd confiscate my tools for making magical contracts, and then, he'd restrict all of my dealings with the nobility, and then he'd punish all of the signatories. If that happens, I think that would probably be that old bastard's best possible outcome! So, until registration finished, there was no way we could let anyone know about how your paper-making methodology worked."

"Ah, I see..."

Now that I know how vigilant Benno's trying to be against the guild master, I can understand how strict he was being.

“However, there’s no way I could get the two of you tangled up in the enormous pain in the ass that is a negotiation between adults, right? Especially you, Maïne, since you don’t pay any attention to your actual surroundings, and then *just* because some acquaintance saves your life, you just start carelessly blathering on about all sorts of sensitive information.”

“Whaaat?! You trust me that little?!”

“There’s an abundance of evidence. Reflect on your own actions a little.”

“Ngh...”

Reminded of the various things I’d wound up doing at the guild master’s house, I can’t come up with any retort. Certainly, from Benno’s standpoint, he has no idea what I might wind up doing, so keeping me isolated is the best course of action.

“I think I understand the gist of it,” I say. “So, were the negotiations with the parchment makers’ association very difficult?”

“That was all just making the necessary arrangements, so that wasn’t particularly difficult. No, the only bothersome part of that was dealing with that old bastard.”

The guild master really is the last boss, huh? I never thought that Benno would be treating the parchment makers as trash mobs. This is a development I hadn’t even considered, back when I was making paper with a huge knot in my stomach.

Otto, who had been quietly listening to our conversation, grins broadly, then opens his mouth to speak.

“I was taken along to that meeting. We worked out an agreement on a compromise plan.”

“Compromise plan?”

“The one where we’d distinguish kinds of paper based on usage,” says Benno.

“Ahh...”

Benno’s words reminds me of the fact that I’d suggested it to begin with, and I clap my hands. With that compromise, we’d be able to distribute paper far and wide while preserving, for now, the parchment makers’ market territory. This is a big step forward for my book-making project, isn’t it? As paper becomes more widespread, the price will drop, and just through that alone books will become way easier to make.

It looks like I finally don’t have to worry about paper anymore when it comes to making books.

Once Benno establishes a workshop for mass production, all my paper-related worries will disappear. My next issue will be finding ink, and then printing... and as my thoughts take off into the clouds, even Otto looks like he's somehow enjoying himself.

"And now everyone's shocked! Who's this guy, and what did he do with that totally uncompromising Benno we know?! So now there's this rumor going around that the water goddess came to visit him."

"The water goddess?" asks Lutz, speaking up now that the conversation has digressed from the troublesome tales of the meeting and the mood of the room has softened somewhat.

"The springtime herald of the melting snow," explains Otto. "The goddess who brings an end to the long winter."

Otto's words snap me back to my senses. Now that I think about it, I really don't know any of the mythology of this world at all. I already found one mention of a god in the new year's greeting, so it's likely that there's more of them hiding around in day-to-day life around here.

"...This water goddess, is she different from the goddess of spring that we talk about in the new year's greeting?"

"Different, hmm... well, the goddess of melted snow, the goddess of new buds, and all of the other spring-related goddesses are all called goddesses of spring, you know?"

"Huh..."

Is it just me, or does calling it "polytheism" make it sound a little more relatable? At least, this doesn't look like a world where I'd be forced into the same kind of monotheism that I was kind of coerced into in my Urano days. I'm feeling a little less anxious about my baptism, now.

"...That's it?" says Otto, looking blankly at me. It seems that, after he took the effort to explain all of that to me, responding with a single "huh..." might have been a little rude.

"Hm? Oh, umm... I'm happy to know a little more about the goddesses now. I'll be sure to ask you more about the gods next time!"

"Oh, that's not what I meant, O wa—"

"Otto, do you *want* to be kicked out?" growls Benno, giving him an extremely irritated look.

I have a feeling that my incorrect guess might have somehow been the cause, but I

can't really tell how just from seeing Benno's angry expression, and I'm still pretty sure I was correct.

"Mister Benno, now that I think about it, why did you bring Mister Otto to the meeting?"

I toss Otto a lifeline in order to stop Benno from talking about how he was going to kick him out of the family, and it seems like I successfully manage to shift Benno's attention to me. He quickly lets go of Otto and turns to me. Otto gives me an extremely thankful look.

"When the paper makers' association gets off of the ground, I plan to have him help me with it."

"Oh? Wait, then, you mean Mister Otto will get to be a merchant?!"

Has the day come where Otto, who had abandoned the life of a merchant so that he could marry Corinna, could finally become one again? As I think that happy thought, though, Benno shakes his head at me.

"No, Otto'll be a soldier til the bitter end. I'm just using him in his free time."

"Whaaaat?! That's really mean, isn't it?!"

To have to work all day as a soldier, and then be used by Benno as a merchant when his soldier's work is done, that really is a pitiable state to be in. Lutz, sitting next to me, nods in agreement. However, Benno just snorts, then looks at Otto with a cruel grin.

"Oh, it's only natural that he work to pay me his share of the rent. For Corinna's sake. Right, Otto?"

"I think I'd be earning a little more than just rent money, though?"

The two of them stare at each other with dark smiles, now completely ignoring me and Lutz. I have no idea how long it'll take for them to be finished with this staring contest, so I tap lightly on the table.

"Mister Benno, I've got a follow-up question. What eventually happened with the guild master?"

Benno turns his gaze away from Otto and focuses on me. He shrugs his shoulders, then

grins triumphantly.

“Since we found some common ground, the parchment makers’ association agreed to the creation of a paper makers’ association, so the guild leader *reluctantly* approved of it too.”

“He was forced to approve of it, you mean?” interjects Otto.

Otto’s phrasing is probably a little more accurate, I think. Lutz and I nod in understanding. Seeing this, Benno clucks his tongue at us.

“I’ve filled out every necessary form exactly, I’ve negotiated everything with the parchment makers’ association, and I’ve done so with nobody getting injured. The fact that everything’s being dragged out so long, even with all that, is entirely because the guild master is dragging his feet.”

“Yeah, that’s about right,” says Otto. “But, *maybe*, you might not have needed to say things like ‘if you’re so senile that you can’t read paperwork anymore then you should just retire already’ or ‘how about you just let me do it if you are so damned inclined’? Just a thought.”

I squeak as my breath catches in my throat.

“It’s because you say things like that!” I say. “If you’re being that... *brazen*, then of course things are going to get difficult! You made the guild master mad, didn’t you?”

“Oh, his face was *bright* red, he was so mad.” says Otto. “I didn’t think a person’s face could even get that red!”

Otto is talking like this is somehow kinda funny, but this is absolutely not a laughing matter. Benno adds, “that was a sight to see,” and Otto nods emphatically.

“I don’t care how much I piss off that old bastard. This time, thanks to all of his pestering, not pissing him off would have been even harder.”

It seems like the gulf between Benno and the guild master has grown even wider and deeper thanks to these events.

“Anyhow, this time for sure I’ve confirmed that our registration is complete. Now, it’s time to put everything into making and selling some paper. First off, I’ve got to decide on a workshop in the city.”

Now that the complicated problems have been solved, Benno starts talking about how he'd like to decide on a workshop for putting paper into production.

"I'd like to get mass production going at a workshop shortly after this summer's baptismal ceremonies are complete."

"Why?" asks Otto, tilting his head curiously.

"After doing a lot of profit calculations, I've come to the conclusion that it's best to get started after Lutz is baptized and starts his apprenticeship here. At that point, I don't need to pay these two anymore. Plus, by the time I find a workshop, have the equipment made, procure the raw materials, and have the staff learn the manufacturing technique, it'll be around that time anyway."

"Hm, you're right," I say.

It had been hard for Lutz and I to secure our own tools as well. It's only natural that getting however many large-scale tools he'd need for mass production would be incredibly difficult.

"In any event, Maïne, Lutz. I'll be consulting with you on picking out a workshop, and you'll tell me everything you know about the manufacturing process."

It seems that now it's Benno's turn to ask the real questions. Lutz and I exchange a glance, and let out tired sighs.

Chapter 62

Workshop Selection and Tools

“Tell me everything you know about paper-making, so that I can figure out where and how large the workshop will be,” says Benno, looking very self-important. Wouldn’t it be appropriate, though, for me to ask for a fee for this information, like I did for the rinsham?

Watching him carefully, I open my mouth. “Lutz and I aren’t going to make any money off of this paper makers’ association of yours, so we’re going to have to charge you for any information about actually making paper, you know?”

“...Ah well, can’t be helped. How much?”

Benno smiles, smugly, tapping the table with his finger. How much should I actually charge, though? I have no idea whatsoever what a fair price would be in this case.

“Ummm, how much are you willing to pay?”

“Whatever you ask for. How much?”

He turns the question back around on me, his smile widening, perhaps having guessed my thought process. The only reference point I have for information fees is the rinsham, which was three small gold coins. Since Benno’s going as far as to make a new trade association for vegetable-based paper, he must be thinking that he’ll be able to do great things with this.

“Nnngh... H... how about tw... twice the fee from the rinsham?”

“Alright, deal. Here.”

Benno pulls out his guild card and waves it around in front of me. I take mine out and clink it against his. He just calmly accepted my offer without even the slightest flicker in his broad smile. Should I have charged him way more? I really don’t have any idea how to estimate these things at all.

As I ponder, grumbling, Otto folds his arms, looking at Benno.

“For the workshop, let’s listen to what Maïne has to say, then start thinking about the size and amount of equipment we’ll need, and the scale and location of the workshop itself. For now, we can probably just appropriate the tools that we already have at the storehouse, right?”

Otto’s words cause my eyes to bug out.

“Those are the property of Maïne’s Workshop!” I say. “If you take them, then won’t Lutz and I basically not be able to make paper anymore?”

“...The storehouse itself is Master Benno’s, though,” adds Lutz.

I glare at Lutz, lips pursed, when he interjects, then look over at Benno. If they start doing things like appropriating our tools, then we’d be in a lot of trouble. Plus, those tools aren’t at all suited for mass production.

“Also,” I add, “that really won’t work. The tools we have at Maïne’s Workshop can’t really be used for mass production.”

“Hm?”

Benno raises his eyebrows, not following my train of thought. I start to explain.

“Our tools were made primarily for the sake of finishing our prototype, so we made them easy for us to use. They’re lightweight, miniaturized, and simplified, so they’re not really suited for mass production. Also, I was concerned about spending too much of your money, sir, so I made several substitutions using things at hand...”

“Huh?” says Otto. “Why would you be concerned about that when he said he’d give you money? It would have been better to put together the best equipment you could...”

Otto looks at me like I’m an idiot, but I really hadn’t been thinking about trying to put together the best possible equipment at all. Back then, getting even a single nail was extremely difficult for me, so the only thing I was thinking about was how I could make things as cheaply as possible.

“I wouldn’t have done something so shameless,” I reply. “I think that I might get a little more bold in the future, though.”

“I really don’t care if you get more bold,” says Benno. “So, when you say these aren’t suited for mass production, what do you mean by that?”

“There’s a difference in physique.”

I think about how to phrase things in a way that's easiest for Benno to understand.

"For example, the paper frame that the two of us have been using is the size of a written contract, but an adult man could probably use a much bigger paper frame for making paper. If you could use a frame that's large enough to make four sheets at a time, then you'd save a lot of time."

"Ah, I see."

Even if you scale up the operation, if you still make relatively small contract-sized sheets one by one, all you'll do is increase the amount of time and manpower you're using. If you're strong enough to use a larger paper frame, then making several sheets at once is a better idea.

"And also, since we wanted something we could actually handle, we're using a large tub to make pulp, but if you're going to use a larger paper frame, then you'd need a larger vat to make all the pulp you'd need, wouldn't you? And right now, I'm using cooking chopsticks to mix the pulp instead of the rake you'd usually use..."

"I'm not familiar with any of these tools," says Benno, tapping his temple thoughtfully and looking down at me. Most of these tools are things that we didn't order through him.

"Hmmm, I think that it might be hard to understand what kind of tools you'd need and what we've been substituting if we don't show you our actual process down at the storehouse while we explain it."

"Oh? Well then, I'll stop by your storehouse tomorrow to observe you. I haven't actually seen your workshop before, so this is a perfect chance."

I'm startled by how smoothly he suddenly decides tomorrow's course of action. I try to recall what plans we'd already had for making paper.

"Even if you say you want to come by to observe us, we unfortunately just finished our current round of paper today. So, tomorrow all that we'll be doing is letting it dry, so we don't particularly have anything to do with that particular batch, so we were thinking that we'd go to the forest tomorrow to gather raw materials..."

"Hoh, so you're saying that you're starting a brand new batch?"

"That's right. We'll be cutting wood, steaming it, and stripping off the bark. We'll then bring it back to the warehouse to let it dry, and that's about it."

As I talk, Benno nods along.

“Alright,” he says, “Mark will go with you.”

“Huh? To the *forest*?”

When he says that, I try to picture Mark coming to the forest with us. It just doesn’t work. I refuse.

“Mister Mark is a wonderfully proper gentleman who always dresses impeccably. He’s not at all suited for things like cutting wood or stripping bark.... Hmm, but, Mister Benno, you’d be alright wearing work clothes, right?”

“Hey, what do you mean by that?!”

“What I’m saying is that you’re the one who wants to learn more about the work, sir, so I think it would be best for you to go.”

“That’s *not* what you just said.”

Even though he has a pretty disagreeable expression on, Benno agrees that he does want to understand the process from beginning to end, so he decides to accompany us after all. Before we know it, we’ve made plans to head off to the forest to work tomorrow.



The next day, when Lutz went to retrieve the key to the warehouse, it seems that he apparently found Benno, already wearing work clothes. Mark, who came out to greet Lutz, had a troubled expression on his face, constantly worried that Benno might be running wild. Lutz quietly whispers all of this to me shortly after he returns.

“I’m impressed you can work in such a tiny space,” says Benno.

He slowly spins around inside the storehouse, taking it all in. To Benno, who usually works in such a large shop, it’s only natural that a storehouse only big enough for two children to loiter in would seem very cramped.

“It’s fine for when it’s just me and Lutz, but when you’re here as well it is pretty small. Well, most of our work takes place outside, so there’s not a lot that we actually do in here, you know.”

We start gathering up the tools we usually take with us when we head to the forest to gather materials. Into the pot, we put the steamer, the bucket, and a bit of firewood. Today, all I’m carrying in the basket strapped to my back is my pair of chopsticks, the

plank I use in place of a plate, some kalfe root, and some butter. Benno offers to carry part of Lutz's load, but Lutz just slowly shakes his head.

"It's okay, I'm used to it by now... uh, sir. Instead of helping with my stuff, it would really help if you could carry Maïne."

"You always carry all of this, kid?" Benno replies, frowning. "That must be rough, isn't it?"

He snorts, then abruptly picks me up, backpack and all, carrying me piggyback.

"Wha?!"

"Hold on tight. Lutz, give me that big wooden frame, at least. I can't stand how it looks like it might get smashed."

Benno takes the steamer in one hand, then starts walking. His strides are enormous, and he sways back and forth a lot as he walks. Terrified, I cling tightly to his head.

"Ummm, so we picked the size of our pot based on what Lutz is able to carry, but since the pot is fairly small that means that the amount of wood we can steam at once has to be small as well. You should probably consider whether you want to use one big pot or a few smaller pots, I think? If you find a workshop near the river, then you won't have to carry the pots to the river, just the materials, so it'll be much easier."

"Mhmm..."

Since today we're going with Benno, an adult, we don't need to be with the rest of the unbaptized children today. We skip the usual meeting point entirely and head straight from the storehouse to the southern gates. When we arrive, I see my father and Otto talking about something.

"Daddy, Mister Otto. We're heading out!"

I give the two of them a big wave over Benno's shoulder. Their eyes widen a bit, and they hurry over to us.

"Maïne, who's this?" says my father.

"This is Mister Benno, the merchant that I've been working with. Mister Benno, this is my father."

While the two of them exchange their greetings, I notice out of the corner of my eye

that Otto is shaking a little bit.

“Mister Otto, what’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing, I mean, looking at you two together, Benno’s looking a little bit fatherly...”

“Shut up, Otto. I’m a bachelor.”

Benno angrily smacks Otto upside the head, then starts walking with long, swaying strides.

Huh, Benno’s a bachelor, he says? He’s at a great age, though.

Since the marriage age is pretty low around here, my father is barely in his thirties. It feels a little strange for Benno, who looks to be roughly the same age as my father, to be unmarried.

“Mister Benno, you’re not going to get married?” I asked.

“...Yeah, probably not.”

“Would it be okay for me to ask why? This is purely out of curiosity, so if you don’t want to say then I can forget all about it.” Benno smiles wryly. “It’s not like it’s a big secret,” he says. “When I wanted to get married, I had my hands full taking care of my family. After Corinna got married, I didn’t have anyone left that I still had to take care of, but then the woman I wanted to marry died. There wasn’t anyone else but her, so I never got married. That’s it.”

“That’s it,” he says, even though it’s such a heavy story.

I let out a slow sigh. The reason he’s single is because a very important person to him died. I can’t really pester him for more details, nor can I poke fun at his bachelorhood. I pat his head gently, and he smiles wryly.

“What’s this, now?”

“Oh, nothing. I just thought that you were going to say that you’re single because you’re in charge of such a large shop and things like marriage and succession and all of that would make your life obnoxious.”

“Well, you’re not wrong. But, it’s been pretty quiet lately. I’ll be training Corinna’s kids to by my successors so there’s no problem there. That was one of the conditions I gave for those two to get married, after all.”

Whoa. Hang in there, Mister Otto.

As I quietly cheer him on in my heart, we reach the end of the dark tunnel and emerge into the world beyond, where the stone-paved road is replaced with dirt and the air is much, much fresher. The broad field of view leaves me with a great sense of freedom.

“Ahhh, it’s been a while since I’ve gone to the forest,” says Benno.

“Now that you mention it, you did say a while ago that you’d gone picking paru. I thought that merchants’ children didn’t really go to the forest, though. Freida even said that she’d never been except for picnics...”

I can’t forget the shock I’d felt when Freida said that it sounded like I went on picnics every day. Benno chuckles, then gets a nostalgic look in his eyes.

“I’d occasionally slip out of my house to go in secret,” he says.

“In secret...”

“The other apprentices around my age that were working in my family’s shop would go there to forage, you know? So it’s only natural that I’d get curious, right? Kids still do that, right?”

“...Aaaah, yeah,” says Lutz, “now that you mention it, every now and then when some of the apprentice kids come with us I see some people I don’t really know.”

After their baptisms, apprentices still go to the forest on their days off to forage or hunt. Unlike us pre-baptismal children, they can go to and from the forest freely, so there’s lots of them that just go whenever they want. However, sometimes they have friends who aren’t apprentices yet, so they occasionally meet up with other kids at the usual meeting stop and go with the group. It seems like even Benno went with other kids like that.

“So, how do the children of merchants generally spend their time?” I ask.

“I spent most of my time studying. I studied how to receive customers that come to the shop. When I went to the town market, I had to do calculations on the prices I saw, learn how to identify outsiders, how to tell when goods were good or bad, and so on...”

No matter how he describes it, it’s really difficult for me to understand a life where every single action is related to commerce. All I can really understand from that is how utterly different his life was compared to mine and Lutz’s.

“That’s certainly very different from how Lutz and I live, huh...”

“I’m sure kids from smaller shops are even more different, too.”

Lutz puts our gear down by the riverside, makes sure the fireplace is still intact, and sets up the pot. I draw some water from the river, pour it into the pot, and set the steamer on top of it. Today, I throw in potato-like kalfe roots in as well.

"I'm going to go cut some wood," says Lutz. He looks up at Benno. "What will—"

"Lutz," Benno interrupts, "if you're going to work at my shop, start calling me 'sir'."

"Sir, what will you do? Are you going to stay here and wait with Maïne, come with me to cut wood, or..."

"I'm interested in the kind of wood that you'll be cutting, so I'll go with you. Shall we?"

Lutz and Benno head deeper into the forest to search for wood. I collect whatever firewood I can find in the area around the pot, keeping an eye on our things. The two of them eventually come back, carrying a lot of freshly-cut wood. When Benno looks at me sitting idly by the pot, he raises his eyebrows a bit.

"You're not doing anything?"

"You asked me what I can actually do, right? Right now, my job is to sit here and be quiet. If I faint, there usually isn't anyone here to carry me back home."

When Lutz isn't by my side, that's when I have to try my hardest to move around as little as possible, or so I'm constantly told. There have been many, many times where I've arbitrarily started doing things on my own and wound up causing a lot of trouble for everyone.

"...Lutz, you always surprise me with how *patient* you are."

"That's right!" I say. "You're really amazing."

"Stop it, Maïne!" he says, giving me an embarrassed glare. "I'm gonna go grab some more firewood."

He makes his escape, and Benno and I grin at his back as he runs off. Then, I pull out my knife. I start picking folin out of the pile of wood Lutz brought back and cutting it down to a size that will fit into the steamer. Meanwhile, I keep telling Benno about Lutz.

"Lutz really is amazing. If he hadn't been there, I don't think I'd even still be alive. The first time the devouring tried to swallow me, he saved me."

"Oh?" he says, looking a little impressed.

"Back then, before we started doing things that actually made money, Lutz was always

looking after me, and helping me make a lot of different things.”

“...Ah, I’d heard about that. So, Lutz is basically your patron, then?”

It was entirely possible for me to have hogged all of the profits to myself for our winter handiwork and our paper-making enterprises. To a merchant, it must seem very strange for me to split the rights and profits for the things I’ve been dragging him into.

“That’s right. Since Lutz basically saved my life, I’ve been doing what I can to help him. Although all I’ve really been able to do is come up with new things to make, and then once we have that, sell them through you and make money off of that.”

“...Ah, I see. So, I need to make sure to keep him at my store at any cost, hm.”

“Thank you for your continued support,” I reply.

Benno pats me on the head, as if to say “leave it to me”, and I feel relieved.

By the time I finish cutting the folin down to sticks of about the same length, Lutz comes back. He adds some water to the pot, and I use my cooking chopsticks to put the wood into the steamer, taking out the potatoes already in there.

“Lutz, quick, add the butter!”

“Yeah, I know!”

He sticks some butter in it, giving us buttered potatoes. Benno looks down at the potatoes lined up on the plate-substitute board with the same unimpressed expression that Lutz had the first time he’d tried it.

“Master Benno, sir, Maïne’s cooking is really delicious. Even if it’s just a potato.”

Lutz laughs excitedly as he bites into his potato. Seeing this, Benno shrugs, lifting his potato to his mouth as if he doesn’t have much choice in the matter.

“...That’s actually good.”

“Eh heh heh, steaming it actually locks in all of the flavor, and biting into a piping hot potato on a cold day is really extraordinary.”

After we finish eating our potatoes, we ask Benno to keep an eye on the pot for us while Lutz and I start foraging. We manage to gather a few medicinal plants.

After the bark is steamed, we rinse it in the river water and immediately start

stripping it off. Benno helps us as well, but he's unexpectedly clumsy with his knife, and leaves the bark in tatters. As he helps us, I watch our total amount of usable bark slowly decrease.

"Mister Benno," I say, "we're all done with stripping the bark now. Could you please help Lutz clean up?"

Since we're done stripping bark, we head back to the storehouse and hang the bark up to dry. Benno wrinkles his nose when we ask him to hang the bark on the nails we have pounded into the shelves, but helps us out anyways. I'm a little envious of how he doesn't need to slowly inch a footstool along as he works in order to reach the top shelves.

"Like this, if we had any more bark then we wouldn't be able to dry it. If we wanted to dry that much, then you'd want to build something like this."

I sketch out diagrams on my slate, explaining some of the tools we don't have at the workshop. Benno nods, asks questions, and picks up some of the tools we do have to feel them.

"We'll dry this batch of bark in the sun until it's completely dried. If we don't make sure it's entirely dry, then it might start getting moldy. Then, we'll take the dried bark and soak it in the river for at least a day."

"Hm, that could be stolen then."

"That's right. That's the part that's the most worrying. If someone knows how this is made, then here's where the money is. That's why I think it's all the more important for the workshop to be near the river."

As I continue talking, I pat the bag of ash sitting in the corner of the workshop.

"After soaking the bark in the river, we use our knives to strip off the outer bark, boil the inner bark with ash, and then soak it in the river for another day. Boiling the bark with the ash makes the fibers soft and flexible."

"I see..."

"After that, we remove any impurities or defects from the fibers, then beat the fibers with this rectangular stick here until they're as soft as cotton. This specific one is sized for Lutz, so an adult man could use a much larger and heavier stick, which would be more efficient."

I point at the table we use for beating fibers, and Benno picks up the stick and waves it around. “I *would* want something heavier if I was going to be smashing things,” he murmurs.

“Then, we take the now-fluffy fibers and mix them with a sticky fluid called a binding agent, making pulp. Since we’re using this paper frame, we can make it in this tub, but an adult would be able to use a much bigger paper frame, so increasing the size of both the frame and the tub would let you make much more paper. To mix the pulp we’ve just been using a bunch of cooking chopsticks that Lutz made tied together, but if you’re using a big vat then you wouldn’t be able to mix the entire thing together like that, so you’d want to use a larger tool, something like a large comb to mix it. Something like this.”

I sketch out another diagram on my slate. Benno hums thoughtfully, and starts stroking his chin.

“After that, we use this paper frame. We shake and tilt it around like this, to make sure that it all ends up the same thickness, then take the finished sheet and pile it here, on the paper bed. We let it dry on its own, giving us this,” I say, indicating the pile of mostly-dried paper on the bed. “Tomorrow, we’ll put a weight on top of the pile, drying it out even more.”

“What for?”

“This will squeeze the last of the stickiness from the binder out. After that, we stick each sheet to that board over there, one by one, and let it dry out in the sunlight. Once we peel it off from there, the paper is finally done.”

After I finish my rough explanation of the entire process, Benno lets out a long sigh, seeming to admire our work.

“This is a much longer process than I’d thought,” he says.

“Well, while it’s drying, then you can work on something else, so it doesn’t really feel like that long of a process. If you want to make a lot of it, I think you’d wind up very busy. Besides, right now, actually going into the river is extremely difficult.”

Benno nods deeply, having helped us draw water from the river today. “So this’ll be the kind of workshop that shuts down in the winter,” he mutters. If you couldn’t put the wood in the river during the winter, then it would be too hard to work with, so you couldn’t make any paper.

“Since you can’t make it without a river, please make sure you think very hard about the location of the workshop itself.”

“Alright, got it. Looks like things are going to be pretty hectic for me, then!”

Despite the fact that he says things will be hectic, he looks like he’s actually enjoying himself. *You can do it!* I think to myself, silently cheering him on.

I thought that at that point everything would be completely out of my hands, but Benno, having only a little practical experience making paper, excitedly starts picking out workshops, the people who wind up being extremely busy are me and Lutz. When we’re not making paper, Mark sticks to us like glue, escorting us around to various craftsmen to help him order tools and equipment. “This is still covered under your information fee,” we’re told, and are given no choice but to go along with it.



The tools are made, the people are gathered, the manufacturing process is explained, and the warehouse is acquired. By the time things start coming together, the season has turned to summer.

Chapter 63

Lutz's Apprenticeship Preparations

"Maïne, what should we do today? The weather looks pretty bad."

The dull, heavy clouds that blanket the sky outside my window aren't at all ideal for making paper. It might still be possible to go to the forest to forage, but if it suddenly starts pouring I'll just wind up being a huge burden, so I should probably just stay home and watch the house.

This spring, on days when we've been blessed with good weather, we worked on making paper to earn some money. When the weather wasn't quite so good, we went with Mark, wandering around the city as we worked on getting the workshop ready. However, by now, the workshop is basically finished and all of the workers have been trained. The other day, they even successfully finished their trial run, so by now there's not a whole lot left for me and Lutz to do.

"Mister Benno said that our baptismal ceremony is next Fire Day, so I wanted to do our last round of paper making, but I guess we can't help the weather being as bad as it is, huh..."

"Kinda sucks about not being able to do another batch of paper, but man, I still can't believe that I have *so much money* now, right?"

Every time we went to deliver our paper, we each brought back one small silver coin with us for spending money, which we gave to our families. This meant that our food situation had gotten a little bit better, but our lifestyles ultimately hadn't really changed all that much. The amount of money we have stored with the guild, however, is enormous, partly due to just how comparatively great the weather has been for paper making and partly due to the fact that tronbay paper sells for an enormously high cost. After our most recent sale the other day, I now have a little more than two large gold coins' worth of money saved up, and Lutz isn't very far behind at all. No matter how you think about it, this is not the kind of money pre-baptized children should have.

Well, I guess that once we're baptized, I won't be earning any money for a little while,

after all.

I think to myself, going over the list of what we needed to do before the day of our baptismal ceremonies, then suddenly look up in shock.

“Lutz, we need to go see Mister Benno today. I completely forgot!”

“Huh? He’s not expecting us, is he?”

“Oh, he isn’t, but our baptisms are next Fire Day, right? We need to make sure that you’ve got everything that you’ll need for your apprenticeship already prepared. ...Your parents aren’t merchants, so they won’t have any tools prepared for you, you know?”

“...Ah!”

Since a child’s baptism marks the day they start working, it’s tradition for those children to be given the clothing and equipment they’ll need for their new apprenticeships. When a child follows in their parents’ footsteps, their parents pick out those tools to give to them as presents, as if to say, “do your best”.

However, Lutz’s parents haven’t been able to prepare him anything. One reason is that Lutz’s father still objects to this course of action. Another is that since neither of his parents are merchants, neither of them know what tools he’ll actually need. Even worse, they don’t even know just how much money it would take to get someone prepared to be a merchant’s apprentice.

Benno told us that clothing was necessary, and we’d placed an order, but I can’t believe that that could possibly be enough. When Tuuli, a seamstress’s apprentice, was baptized, our parents gave her not just a set of work clothes but also a kit full of sewing supplies. It’s highly likely that a merchant is going to need much more than just clothing. Luckily, we’ve saved up quite a lot of money, so we should be able to buy whatever we need to ourselves, and if we ask Benno or Mark, they’ll probably tell us what we need to know.

“I really don’t know what else you’ll need besides clothes,” I say. “Since you’ll be doing a lot of studying as part of your new hire training, you’ll need your slate and your calculator, but there’s got to be more than just that, right?”

“Right now, we can buy whatever we need. I’m really glad we saved up all that money, just like you said.”

Even though Auntie Karla had become Lutz’s ally, there really wasn’t much of anything

she could actually do to help her son become a merchant. She doesn't have any connections to any merchants, and Lutz's father still opposes his decision. All she was really able to do is scold his brothers for their bad behavior, but Lutz has told me that even just that has made his life a little easier.

"When you become an apprentice, Mister Benno is basically going to be acting as your guardian, so I think it would be best for us to go ask him about it," I say.

I grab my usual tote bag and head out into the gloomy weather with Lutz, walking towards Benno's shop.

"Oh my, but I thought you weren't going to have any more paper for us for another few days?"

Mark, who has more-or-less figured our schedule out by now, looks a little surprised to see us approach.

"We're hoping to ask Mister Benno about something," I say. "...Although, maybe we might be able to ask you?"

I think I remember hearing that Mark was in charge of educating apprentices at this shop, at least.

"What might you need?"

"We'd like to know what kinds of things, such as tools, an apprentice might need. Lutz's parents aren't merchants, so they don't know what kinds of work-related things to give to him at his baptism, so we need to prepare these ourselves..."

"Ahh, I see," he says, looking a little astonished. "I hadn't thought of that." He frowns slightly, tapping on his temples.

"I know the ceremony is very soon," I say, "but do we still have enough time? Since Mister Benno will be Lutz's guardian, would it be best for us to discuss this with him?"

"Hmm, you're right. After you've finished your discussion with the master, shall we go purchase what you need?"

As usual, we're led into the inner room. There, we see a busy-looking Benno, sitting at a desk piled high with boards and papers, quickly scribbling something down.

"Master Benno," says Mark, "Lutz and Maïne have come to see you."

“What for?” he asks, not looking up as he continues to write on his board.

I gently push Lutz forward, urging him to ask on his own.

“Master Benno, sir, I would like to ask you about the equipment I’ll need to prepare for my apprenticeship,” he says.

“The equipment you’ll need to prepare...?”

Benno puts his pen down, perhaps having reached a good stopping point. He has a dubious expression on his face, like he isn’t quite sure what Lutz is asking, so I step in to explain further.

“Ordinarily, we were thinking that his parents would prepare these things, but since neither of Lutz’s parents are merchants, they don’t actually know what he needs. So, what will Lutz be needing when he becomes an apprentice? Surely it’s more than just clothes, right?”

“Ahh, that’s right. Go with Mark to buy your things. I got word that the clothes you ordered before are done, so go order a few changes of clothes when you go pick those up.”

“Alright,” I say, nodding.

Lutz looks confused, slowly tilting his head to the side.

“Changes of clothes?”

“Obviously,” replies Benno. “There’s no way you’ll wear the same set of clothes to work day after day, will you? It’ll be a big problem if they get dirty or start stinking.”

Since this is a shop that deals with the nobility, appearance is extremely important. An employee would absolutely not be able to show themselves in torn or dirty clothing. Practically every employee of this shop is always dressed very tidily.

“A change of clothes for every day, sir?” Lutz asks, frowning.

“That’s right.”

“...You kidding me?”

In Tuuli’s case, and probably Lutz’s brothers’ cases as well, her work clothes get washed once a week. It’s work that our mother does on her day off, so the concept of changing clothes every day doesn’t even really exist. Since we don’t even have much in the way of ordinary clothing, we keep wearing the same set of clothing for as long

as any freshly-laundered clothing is still drying. Also, when fabric gets washed, it gets damaged bit by bit, so there are many families that, with the exception of underwear, avoid washing their clothes for as long as they can bear it.

Unlike Benno, who has subordinates to do it for him, Lutz is on the bottom of his family's hierarchy. It would probably be very hard for him to ask his mother to wash an entire week's worth of changes of clothing. However, this is something that is definitely required for work.

"If you can't ask Auntie Karla," I say, "what if you washed it yourself? You'll have some free days when you're an apprentice."

"Urgh..."

"If you were a live-in apprentice, then you'd have to do it all by yourself anyway, you know."

"I... guess... you're right."

I can understand his astonishment; this isn't at all in line with what he'd thought was common sense. However, there's nothing he can do now but swallow this new information about what society expects common sense to be.

"I know how shocking it is to be hit with something that doesn't fit your common sense, but you can't really do anything else but accept it. This is something that you need to do to make sure that the customers don't get uncomfortable. It's just another way craftsmen and merchants are different."

"Ah, okay," he nods.

Benno, as well, looks like he's experiencing some culture shock. He blinks, slowly, muttering to himself.

"Your lives really are fundamentally different, huh."

"So, please," I say, "if you think something might be a little strange, please point it out. We really don't know anything about it."

"Alright, I'll keep an eye out. ...Mark, I'll leave these two to you."

"Very well, sir."

We wait briefly for Mark to reach a stopping point in his own work, then the three of us head to pick up our finished clothing. He carries me in his arms along the way there, but after an entire spring of being carried around while making arrangements for the new workshop, I'm fairly resigned to my fate.

"Welcome," says the shopkeeper.

With a single glance at Mark, Lutz, and me, she immediately realizes what we're here for, and she urges us towards rooms deeper in the shop.

"Please, try these on."

The clothing that she presents me with is just a simple blouse and skirt, but since it's cut to my exact measurements, it fits me perfectly. I'd be extremely excited just for clothing that isn't patched together, but this is *order made*. I experimentally raise and lower my arms, squat down, and stand back up, checking for any problems with the fit, but it feels incredible. It fits amazingly, with no parts of it too tight or too baggy.

"Amazing! This feels great to wear," I say.

"Oh, excellent!" she says. "Now, Mark said you'll be wearing this today, so I'll wrap up these clothes for you here."

It seems that Lutz had ordered two more sets of clothes in the same style and design while I was still trying on my clothes. When I leave the dressing room, Mark and Lutz, who had been talking with the shopkeeper, turn to look at me.

"You look very cute wearing that," says Mark. "A simple change of clothes has made you look like a child from a good family."

"Yeah, you look like a proper lady!" adds Lutz.

Being praised by the two of them like that gets me even more excited. I pinch up the folds of my skirt.

"Really?! I'm cute? Like a proper lady? With just some new clothes?"

"When you're standing still and not talking," says Lutz.

"Hmph," I sulk. "...But, Lutz, your posture has gotten a lot better lately, too, so you're looking like a proper gentleman!"

Benno has been reminding Lutz to mind his personal appearance, so he's been keeping himself as clean as he can, and occasionally washing his hair with rinsham. His golden hair is glossy and sparkling. Also, he's been paying more attention to his posture and movements, saying that he's copying Mark because I keep talking about how excellent he looks. So, now that he's in a proper set of clothes, he really does look gentlemanly.

He doesn't look out of place wearing them at all.

"Now we will be able to actually enter the other establishments we need to go to," says Mark.

It's not rare to be turned away at other stores for being improperly dressed. After Lutz and I use our guild cards to finish paying for our clothes, Mark leads the two of us, in our proper garments, towards the next shop.

We arrive at a stationery shop, and Mark opens its wooden door, which has the mark of a pen drawn on it. The front of the store is dominated by a long counter, behind which stands a kindly-looking old man, polishing something. Products are neatly lined up shelves along the wall, but since this store doesn't sell many goods directly, these are largely just individual samples. This is a fairly typical sort of shop in this town. Small shops are primarily reception areas for their customers, with most of their actual goods in storehouses. It's a necessary measure to protect against robbery, but it's somewhat of a shame that you can't easily compare products against each other.

"Mister Mark! What can I get for you?"

"Hm, let me see. We'll need an ink pot, a pen, and parchment for a contract of employment. We already have a slate, slate pencil, and calculator, I believe? Then, if we add some number of writing boards, that should be it."

As I listen to Mark, I let out a small sigh. These are definitely not the kinds of things that Lutz's parents would be able to afford. Lutz and I may be able to afford them now, but neither ink nor parchment are things that we could be able to so easily buy in our usual sphere of influence.

"Oh, me too!" I say. "I'd like a pen and some ink, please."

Seizing the opportunity Lutz's errands have afforded me, I also purchase a pen and an ink pot for myself. Being able to buy ink, which is such an expensive, unobtainable item, leaves me deeply emotional. The old shopkeeper places pen and ink on top of the counter for me. After we touch our guild cards to complete the transaction, I reach out and pick them up.

"Woohoo! My own pen and ink!"

My smile almost splits my face wide open as I twirl around, holding my new bottle of

ink and my wooden pen. However, Lutz's smile, unlike mine, is bitter.

"All that money I saved is just going away bit by bit. ...Does being a merchant really cost this much?"

In a small shop, they'd probably have the necessary tools already prepared. They also probably wouldn't make their employees buy parchment for their own employment contracts, either. They'd usually use wooden boards for that, I think?

"I don't think it's just being a merchant. I think it's that Benno's shop is so big. But, you should still have money left over, right?"

"But, I mean, we spent *so much* of it, in just one day! That doesn't really feel good. I don't want to have to rely on my parents, so let's try to make even more paper before our baptismal ceremony."

"We really don't have much time left, so it'll be good if it clears up soon, yeah."



We return to Benno's shop and deliver him the news that we've finished our shopping. "From now on, wear those clothes whenever you come here," he tells us, giving us the stamp of approval now that he can see us looking properly apprentice-like.

"Hey, Lutz. Where are you going to store all this? The storehouse?"

"That's probably safest, huh..."

The two of us start discussing how leaving the things we buy in the storehouse for safekeeping would be a bit of a pain, since we'd need to borrow the key in order to get into it. Benno, overhearing this, shrugs his shoulders.

"There's no real reason to keep any of that in the storehouse, why not just keep it in your own room?"

"Umm," I say, "Mister Benno. We don't have our own rooms. I only have a wooden box to keep my things in, and I can only keep what I can fit in there."

Benno's eyes widen when I point out this difference in our standards of living. When I saw Corinna's house, I'd noticed that there were a lot of rooms. It seems that Benno, who was raised as the successor to a large shop, didn't have any friends who didn't have their own rooms, either.

“I’ve got it worse than Maine,” says Lutz. “Even if I put stuff in my box, someone will just arbitrarily rummage around in there and take it all out.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Benno’s eyes are filled with surprise. He squints down at us, uncomprehendingly, and I explain Lutz’s living situation a little more,

“Lutz is the youngest of four brothers. So, his older brothers often just do whatever they like with his things. It’s really rough.”

“So, the brothers are always stealing each others’ things?”

“It’s okay if it’s the younger brother’s things, they say. A younger brother’s things are an older brother’s things. The older brother’s things are only the older brother’s things, though.”

Benno rubs his temples as he listens to my description of Lutz’s home life. I’m sure he had no idea that our living situations could possibly have been *this* different. As a working man who has supported his family ever since his father died, Benno has probably never had to worry about his family stealing his things, nor has he ever had to worry about where to keep his things to begin with. His expression is one of sheer astonishment.

“Lutz. How about you store your things upstairs? I’ll rent you one of the live-in apprentice rooms for cheap. If all of these things that you’ve finally put together disappear before your baptismal ceremonies, or if the things you need for work get stolen, that would be a big hindrance to your work here. That storehouse is too far away, too.”

“...Thank you very much, sir.”

Through Benno’s arrangement, Lutz manages to rent one of the rooms on the top floor of the building that are usually used by live-in apprentices, and use it as a better substitute for our storehouse. If he leaves the things that he’s purchased here and locks the door behind him, then he won’t have to worry about any other person going through any of his things.

“So, when I come to the shop, can I come up here first to get changed?”

“Sounds great,” he says. He wears an enormous smile over having finally acquired a space of his own.

I leave my things here too until we can finally go home. Benno had told us that, since

we had some time, we were going to the merchant's guild with him, so we won't be able to head home immediately.

"If I don't teach you some things about how the guild works in advance, I can't use you to run errands, after all."

Since the children of mercantile families constantly visit the guild to help out their parents, it seems like going there to help retrieve documents is a fairly everyday sort of thing for them to be doing. So, one of the things that an apprentice at a shop can do from the very start is run errands at the guild. Even so, Lutz hasn't been back to the guild ever since we went to deliver Freida's hairpins, so of course he can't run any errands there. He just hasn't ever done so before.

"Is there anything else...?" mutters Benno, trying to figure out what other things a merchant's child would be expected to be able to do. He gathers up a few written applications and hands them to Lutz to bring to the merchant's guild. I decide to tag along, mostly so that I can read the stacks of wooden tablets they keep on their bookshelves.

"Whoa..."

"Man, this is nuts."

The merchant's guild building overlooks the central plaza. In front of it, many wagons are lined up in a long queue. I can see traders leaving their carts in the hands of their fellow passengers as they run into the building, applications in hand. We're still outside, but already I can see how massively congested everything is.

"It looks like the second floor is going to be very busy," I say.

"Yeah," replies Benno. "The baptismal ceremonies are just around the corner, and market day is pretty soon, too."

Just like I'd predicted after seeing all of the carts outside, the crowd packed into the second floor is enormous. Benno pushes his way through the crowd, Lutz trying to avoid being crushed behind him, as he makes his way towards the inner staircase. As usual, I'm being carried in Benno's arms, so I'm thankfully not getting crushed too. We show our guild cards to the guards in front of the stairway, and start to ascend. The tumult of the second floor almost instantly fades behind us. I have the strongest suspicion that the gate we passed through has some sort of magic on it to block out sound.

“Running errands is going to be really difficult, huh,” sighs Lutz.

If we had to force our way through that oppressive wave of people without Benno’s help, we wouldn’t be able to run errands here at all.

“It’s possible that your documents could get stolen or crumpled up by other people, so make sure you watch out for that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now then, first off, these documents go...”

Benno starts heading towards the counter, giving Lutz an explanation as he goes. I turn my back on the two of them and start heading towards the bookshelves, but Benno smacks me on the back of my head and grabs me by the scruff of my neck.

“And just where do you think you’re going, kid?”

“...I was going to go to those bookshelves and read.”

“In your dreams. You don’t get to go off and read. You’re going to be the head of a workshop, so you need to learn all of this too.”

“Yes, sirrrr...”

Benno teaches the two of us how to use the merchant’s guild services, going over the minute details of how to use the reception desk, as well as the various places that particular documents need to be brought to. He makes sure to point out to me where magical contracts are registered and inspected, since I’ll be working to develop new kinds of goods.

“If you file a request here, you can inspect the magical contracts that are registered with the guild.”

“Oh my, if it isn’t Maïne!”

A pair of light pink pigtails rushes up towards us from the other side of the counter. There’s no mistaking who this is. This is the guild master’s granddaughter, Freida. She clearly looks like she’s here to work as an apprentice. I hadn’t even considered that I might run into her here, so I stand there in shock while Freida crosses her arms and pouts at me.

“Spring is nearly over, and you haven’t even been by to visit once!”

“Ah, sorry about that, I’ve just been so busy...”

I'm really sorry, but between making paper and establishing the new workshop, I've been extremely busy. I was thinking that, since I had fulfilled my promise to make sweets with you, I could just kind of break it off. If I were to go, you'd inundate me with invitations, and I wouldn't know exactly how to spot the traps you'd hide in our conversation, so I wouldn't be able to relax at all.

"Well, I'm free tomorrow, so you'd be most welcome to come and play at my house," she says.

"Oh? Umm, but, if the weather clears up tomorrow, then—"

Benno has been lightly resting his hand on my shoulder, and he suddenly squeezes it while I was mid-sentence. I had been about to say that I wanted to make some more paper, but I'm suddenly reminded that he had told us that he wanted us to do everything we could to keep our involvement in the paper-making process a secret, so I hurriedly snap my mouth shut.

Freida glances briefly at Benno's hand, then smiles sweetly. "If it's raining tomorrow, then you're very welcome to come over. It seems that you'll be busy again if the weather clears up, but if it's raining, perhaps you'll come and play? I do recall you promised you'd stop by this spring, yet spring is just about at its end."

"Urgh..."

If she phrases it like that, it's hard to refuse. It's true that if the weather is bad tomorrow I won't be able to make any paper and will thus have plenty of free time.

As I waver, she piles on more pressure. "There's so much I want to talk with you about, especially about the devouring."

"Oh, I had some questions about that as well."

The person I know who has the most knowledge about the devouring is, in fact, Freida. There's things that I've been thinking I want to ask her about, so the chance to speak with her is actually really helpful.

When I say this, Freida's face immediately lights up, and she claps her hands joyfully.

"So, if it rains, then this will be perfect! I'll make some pound cake and have it waiting for you."

"That sounds great. If it rains..."

Fascinated by the thought of pound cake, I agree to her proposal. Benno's grip tightens on my shoulder even more. He smiles down at me, a blood vessel clearly popping out on his temple.

"Maïne," he says, very patiently.

"Mister Benno," says Freida, smiling sweetly as she jumps in to save me. "we're just talking about if it rains."

"Yes, that's right!" I add, looking up at him. "Only if it rains, you know?" I reach up and pat his hand gently as his fingers dig deeper into my shoulder.

"This *idiot*," he grumbles to himself, then looks back down at me. "It will rain tomorrow," he says, matter-of-factly. "Huh?"

It seems that everyone here knows how to read the weather, even without a weather forecast. The rain that begins to fall in the evening lasts all the way through the night, and continues well into the day.

Chapter 64

Contract with Freida

It's raining today. There's no doubt about it, it's raining today.

The patter of heavy raindrops hitting the wooden shutters of the kitchen window causes my shoulders to slump as I sit there, eating my breakfast. Just like Freida had been laughing about, and just like Benno had been growling about, it is definitely raining. There's no helping it, then! Since it's already been determined that I'm going to have to go to Freida's house, at the very least I'm going to try my best to get at least a little bit of good information out of her.

Lutz will be there too, so everything will be fine.

I take a hard hunk of millet bread, soak it in some of last night's leftover soup, and chew soggily on it. I use the last of my bread to wipe off my plate, then, having finished breakfast, start looking around the room. I let out a long sigh.

"I want to bring some sort of present, but we really don't have anything here that I could bring to that house, do we..."

Freida's house is already full of the kinds of things the nobility keep in their houses. There's nothing here that I could possibly give to a girl who already has everything.

Tuuli gulps down some water, then looks at me, head tilted to the side.

"What about some 'simple shampoo'? She was really happy when you brought her some last time, right?"

"Hmm... it's gone on the market already, so Benno told me that if I was going to keep making some for myself, then I can't be giving it away as much as I want."

"Oh, I see. And it's raining, too, so you can't pick any flowers or anything like that... yeah, that's kind of a problem."

Tuuli uses a little bit of water from the water jug to wash off her plate as she talks to me. When she finishes rinsing it, she starts hurrying to get ready to head off for work.

Our mother has already left, and our father is currently fast asleep after coming home late from the night shift. I start washing my own plate as well, trying to keep my voice down.

“If only we could have decided this a few days in advance. Then I could have gone to the forest on a sunny day and picked some fruit to take with me...”

Benno’s been so accommodating towards Lutz. He’s been so accommodating towards me as well, helping me set up Maïne’s Workshop so that I can keep thinking up new product ideas. Lately, I’ve been really trying to avoid doing anything that will make him angry. Sure, I’ve carelessly let slip a few secrets while chatting, and sure I’ve fallen prey to my own desires and just kind of arbitrarily made a few things, but none of that was *intentional*. There’s no way that I actually wanted him to be angry at me. So, if I want to avoid his wrath, rinsham is out. Anything at all to do with paper is out. If I bring a new dessert recipe, then both Freida and Ilse would be happy, I think, but Benno would absolutely get angry, so that’s out, too.

Well, now that I’m not going to be his apprentice, it really is entirely my own business who I give my sweets recipes to, I think, but it would still be more trouble than it’s worth.

As I hum thoughtfully to myself, a loud knock comes from the kitchen door. Tuuli, looking just about ready for work and having just finished putting on a thick cape that has been treated with oil and wax to ward off the rain, heads towards the door.

“Hello, who’s there?” she says.

Ah, I guess Lutz is a little early today, I think to myself, as I put away my clean plate. Suddenly, Tuuli’s startled voice rips through the kitchen.

“Freida?! Why are you...?!”

As soon as I hear those entirely unexpected words, I snap my head around to see Frieda standing outside our front door, accompanied by an attendant. Despite the rain, she is dressed as magnificently as ever, and her attendant wears a tidy uniform. They clash horribly with the impoverished backdrop of my home, emphasizing just how poor my family really is.

“I have been so excited ever since I woke up that I just couldn’t *stand* it, so I’ve come

to pick Maïne up,” she says, smiling sweetly.

I hear an undercurrent of “did you think I’d let you escape?” buried in those words, and a shiver runs down my spine. I want to look away and pretend not to have seen any of this, but I can’t just flee and leave Tuuli behind.

“Whoa,” says Tuuli, smiling as she waves me over, “you must have been really excited to come all this way in this kind of rain!”

Tuuli, you’re an angel. Don’t lose any of that purity.

“Ah, but it is exactly because of the rain that I have come! I couldn’t possibly ask frail Maïne to walk outside in weather like this. I have a carriage waiting for us on the main road.”

It seems she thought I might have refused to come because I didn’t want to catch a cold in the rain. I can’t help but be a little impressed with her level of preparation.

“Whoa,” says Tuuli, an innocent envy showing on her face, “a carriage?! Wow, Maïne, luckyyy!”

Freida looks over at Tuuli, noticing that she’s carrying her things for work.

“Oh my,” she says, slightly tilting her head to the side, “but are you not leaving for work, perhaps?”

“That’s right,” replies Tuuli, a twinge of regret in her voice. “I’ve got to get going soon.”

Frieda glances away momentarily as if thinking about something, then suddenly claps her hands together, a meaningful smile floating across her face.

“Well, if that’s the case, perhaps we can drop you off along the way.”

“What?! Really?! I can ride the carriage too?!”

Tuuli’s face lights up immediately. A carriage is the kind of thing that poor people like us would ordinarily never get to ride on. I understand her excitement perfectly. It looks like I don’t have any choice but to get ready to go immediately.

“Tuuli, I’ve got to go get Lutz,” I say.

“Ah, that’s right! I’ll go run and get him.”

“Oh,” says Freida, “but, if Lutz comes along, then you won’t have anywhere to sit...”

Tuuli sets down her bags and starts to dart out the door when Freida apologetically stops her. At this point, whenever I go out, Lutz comes along with me as my minder. But, if Lutz comes with us, then Tuuli won’t be able to ride in the carriage, and will have to back out.

“Huh? Um? ...Then, I... can’t go?”

Her brief glimmer of hope turns to despair. She hangs her head, looking like she’s on the verge of tears. As I frantically try to figure out what to say to comfort her, Freida smoothly steps in. She takes Tuuli’s hand and then, *and then*, gives her a gentle smile.

“Tuuli, today, Maïne is *my* responsibility. I’ll take care of picking her up and dropping her off. I can promise you that I will take extra care to make sure she does not fall ill. So, why don’t you ride along with us?”

“...Maïne,” says Tuuli, “if you’re riding in the carriage, then you won’t get tired, and you won’t get soaked in the rain, you know? So it’ll be fine if Lutz doesn’t go with you today, won’t it?”

Like hell it’ll be fine!!

That’s what I want to say, but I can’t win against Tuuli’s pleading stare. There’s no way I can tell her to go walk to work because I’d be in trouble without Lutz there with me. Even just seeing how happy she looked to be able to ride in a carriage gets in the way of that idea. I don’t want to go to Freida’s house by myself, but I just can’t turn her down.

“...Yeah, it’ll be fine, Tuuli. You should come with us!”

“Thanks, Maïne. I’ll go and tell Lutz, so you get ready.”

Tuuli, in high spirits, runs off toward Lutz’s house, a spring in her step. The sound of her footsteps quickly recedes into the distance, leaving only the tapping of the rain against the shutters. I glare fixedly at Freida, who just used my sister against me to get Lutz excluded.

“Freida...”

“Your sister seems quite happy, does she not?”

“You’re right. ...Haahhh, I guess I don’t have a choice. I’m the one that didn’t tell her no,

after all.”

I was the one who wasn’t able to toss Tuuli aside, so I can’t really blame Freida any more than this. I get my tote bag ready, thinking to myself how angry Lutz and Benno are going to be with me for acting without thinking again.

“Sorry,” I say, “but I wasn’t able to get a gift ready for you.”

“Oh my, but today you’re giving me a day of your time, are you not? Having the opportunity to speak with you is more than enough.”

She laughs airily, looking the very picture of a girl who’s delighted to be able to play with her friend, but I know very well that Freida is no ordinary, innocent little girl.

“Maïne,” says Tuuli, “I told Auntie Karla about us. C’mon, let’s go! I’m gonna be late.”

Tuuli’s smiling face and bouncing gait immediately disperses the gloomy atmosphere hanging between me and Frieda.

“Well then, shall we?”

We shut the door and head outside. Here, rain gear tends to consist of a thick mantle and a wide-brimmed hat. Of course, this isn’t able to protect perfectly against it, so it gradually gets soaked through if the rain is heavy or you need to be outdoors for too long. Today, though, we’re only going as far as the main street, through narrow alleyways, so I don’t have to worry about getting drenched.

“Quickly now, get on.”

I hurriedly board the carriage waiting for us at the main road, taking off my hat and mantle and setting them next to me. Freida’s attendant sits outside, next to the driver, leaving just the three of us inside the carriage.

“Whoa,” says Tuuli, “is *this* what a carriage looks like on the inside?”

“Come, Tuuli, sit!” says Freida. “Would bringing you to the central plaza work for you?”

“Yeah, the place I’m going is on the craftsmen’s road but it’s really close to the plaza.”

Freida urges Tuuli to sit as she looks gleefully around the carriage. I sit between the two of them. This carriage looks like it was built to seat two adults, but it fits three children just fine, with a little room to spare. When the carriage starts to move, it

shakes and sways just as much as I remember, but unlike the time I'd ridden with Benno and the guild master, I'm sitting in a proper seat, so I don't think I'm about to be flung into the air.

"It's almost time for the baptismal ceremonies, is it not? Maïne, what will you be wearing, perhaps?"

"Oh, she's going to be wearing my hand-me-downs," says Tuuli, "but we've altered it so much that it doesn't look like a hand-me-down anymore. It looks really extravagant!"

Tuuli's chest swells with pride as she answers Freida's question for me. During the winter, Tuuli helped our mother with the alterations from time to time, so there's a few more decorations on the dress than there were before.

"...Extravagant?"

"I can't really describe it, but I think it's got kind of a different feel to it. Mom worked really hard on it, so it's very cute!"

It's likely that Freida, having just seen the condition of our house, is having trouble imagining what "extravagant" would look like for us. She has an expression of wonder on her face, but we're really not lying. Plus, there's a big difference between what people around here usually think "alterations" means and what I did, so it's difficult to explain.

"Your clothing is really fluffy and amazing, too, Freida!" says Tuuli. "I want to try wearing something like that someday..."

"Why, thank you very much. So, did you perhaps make yourself a new hairpin?"

Freida, happy to hear Tuuli's compliment, turns the subject towards hairpins. Apart from the one I'd made for Freida, every hairpin so far has been differently-colored variations on the same design. However, it seems like she can't imagine that me making a hairpin for myself that looks exactly like all of the other ones out there, and is curious about what that might be.

"Oh, it's a gift for her," says Tuuli, "so I worked really hard on making it. It's got three big flowers, like the ones we made for you."

"Then, Maïne's hairpin will match mine, perhaps?"

Freida looks at me, a little doubtfully, her head tilted to one side. Tuuli seems like she

can't really figure out how to properly explain it, so she tugs on my sleeve, looking troubled.

"Well, they're white, and they sway, so even though the big flower are the same, they don't really match. Right, Maïne?"

"We used unbleached thread, so they're more of a cream color, although from a distance they look white. We've added some smaller flowers as well, but there's still a few more differences between yours and mine. You should look forward to seeing it! Right, Tuuli?"

"Yeah, if we tell you all about it now, then you'll have nothing to look forward to."

Tuuli covers her mouth, hiding an impish grin. Freida looks like she's been caught up in it, grinning too.

"Well, then I really am looking forward to it! I'll be watching for you outside."

As we talk about the baptismal ceremonies, a row of workshops, where Tuuli works, comes into view around a corner. The carriage comes to a halt, and Tuuli puts on her mantle and hat. She grabs her bag full of tools, then shoots me a brief worried glance.

"Do not worry," says Freida. "I will look after her the very best I can."

"Tuuli," I say, "good luck at work today!"

"Thanks for letting me ride in your carriage, Freida. Maïne, I'm off, but don't cause any trouble!"

She gives us a big wave, then takes off running towards the workshop. We wave goodbye, and the carriage starts clattering forward once again.



"Welcome, Maïne. Glad you could make it. I baked some pound cake today, and I'd love to hear what you think of it."

When we arrive at Freida's house, Ilse the cook is waiting for us. We're led to the parlor, where tea and pound cake has been set out for us. I take a bite and immediately start to melt. The moist batter has been baked to a perfect shade of golden brown, and, perhaps because Ilse has adjusted for the oven's peculiarities, the cake itself is much more delicious than it was last time.

“Delicious~... This is way tastier than it was before! You did an excellent job tweaking the recipe.”

“I’m happy to hear you say that! I’m curious, can you think of anything to make it even better?”

“Improvement? ...Ummm, I think it’s delicious enough already, though?”

I take another bite of cake, savor its sweet flavor, and ponder for a moment. I know that she could plate it extravagantly when she serves it, or she could change the flavor by adding dried fruits or grated citrus peel, but I also know that just telling her this might be the kind of information provision that would get Benno mad at me.

Hmmm, if I do something, Benno will probably get mad, and this really is delicious even if it’s so simple, so there wouldn’t be any problems at all if I were to just stay quiet, but I really do want to help this extremely eager chef to improve her work.

“Well, it’s not an *improvement*, exactly, but... how about I tell you about it in exchange for a bag of sugar?”

I recall seeing a bag in the kitchen that looked like it contained about one kilogram of sugar. When I ask for that, Ilse looks over at Freida, who actually has the right to decide.

“A bag of sugar... would it be okay to give it to her, Miss Freida?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Alright, I have the young lady’s permission, so! Tell me!”

The sheer ravenous force behind Ilse’s curiosity makes me squeak in momentary fright, but then I open my mouth to speak.

“If you grate ferigine peel and add it to the batter, that’ll change both the smell and the taste, and it’ll still be delicious. You could add other things, too, and those will change the flavor as well. As for what exactly to put in and exactly how much, please do some experimentation on your own. I’ll tell you this as a bonus, too: if you’re going to bring this out to serve to nobles, then you could thoroughly whip heavy cream and make a fringe around the edge of the cake, then decorate it with fruit to make it look really extravagant.”

“Hm?! I’m going to try that!”

Ilse gasps, then immediately stands up and leaves the room. Suddenly left behind,

Freida and I blink a few times, then smile wryly.

“My apologies, Maïne, for showing you, my guest, such a sight. Ilse is usually so calm and composed, but as soon as she sees a new recipe...”

“It’s good to be eager to learn. If she tries her hardest, then just that will increase the number of tasty things out there, won’t it?”

A zeal for studying is something to be admired. I think that spreading tasty things throughout the world would be a very happy thing, so I definitely want to try experimenting with a lot of different things to try to create new kinds of sweetness.

“Come to think of it,” I say, around a big mouthful of pound cake, “why are you apprenticing at the merchants’ guild? Aren’t you going to be opening a shop in the nobles’ quarter? Can you really be an apprentice if you’re not going to actually be an employee?”

It’s already been arranged for Freida to go live with the nobility when she grows up, so I hadn’t even considered that she’d be apprenticing at the merchants’ guild.

Freida takes a sip of her tea. “It’s something I asked my grandfather for. It’s so that I can both study and make connections for when I’ll be living in the nobles’ quarter. When I open my shop, I’ll be doing so all by myself. I can’t go about thinking that it actually is a job that one person can do on her own, so I need to make as many personal connections as I can.”

“All by yourself? You won’t, uh, have any attendants, like Jutte?”

“Nobody but myself will be allowed to stay in the nobles’ quarter. Although, when I go there, my partner will have prepared some attendants for me, so it is not like I’ll be living entirely on my own.”

Even still, I can’t imagine that any attendants she’ll have in the nobles’ quarter will be at all familiar with economics or business management. Having a young woman who has just barely entered adulthood suddenly stripped of her allies and made to open a shop by her self... isn’t that a little too harsh? Can’t they let her have even one person to consult with?

“One person definitely cannot run an entire shop by herself,” she continues. “My family will be allowed in and out of the nobles’ quarter to deliver supplies and the like. They won’t be by my side the entire time, but it’ll be reassuring, will it not?”

“...I guess so.”

I can't imagine that it'll actually be that reassuring, but I can see that Freida is fighting hard for her own destiny, looking straight ahead down her path. I can't really say anything besides to agree with her. The very grown-up way of thinking and speaking that she's learned are her weapons and armor. She must keep determinedly polishing them so that she can survive in the unknown world that waits for her.

"So, in order to make sure that I am able to handle whatever might occur after I establish my shop, I'm apprenticing with the guild and helping out at my family's shop."

"You're amazing, Freida. I can tell that you're putting a ton of thought into all these things that'll be happening so far in the future."

When I say that, she immediately gets a very stern expression on her face. She looks at me very seriously, then after a moment of silence, opens her mouth to speak.

"There's something I'd like to ask you as well. May I?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Ahh, here it comes, the main question, I think. It's pretty obvious what she's about to ask me. I smile, urging her on.

"What in the world are you thinking? Maïne, by all rights, should you not have extracted yourself from Benno's employ and come to work with us? I've been waiting for you to do this. If you're seeking connections, then coming here would..."

If I were seeking any connections with the nobility, then it would be much better for me to rely on Freida and the guild master than on Benno. This is something Otto pointed out to me as well. I think anyone would realize this. Working at a shop that already has a deep connection with the nobility would of course better my chances of finding a favorable solution, even if only a little. Freida made her offer with a self-confidence that's grounded in her family's history and influence. Now, her tone of voice is just a little fiery, and a hint of an unspoken impatience is showing through in her eyes.

"Summer is just around the corner, yet you haven't made any move at all. Have you truly given any thought to what we discussed? If you're not given to a noble as soon as possible, then the way things are going, you'll..."

Freida's complaint is based on her concern for me, since I have the same devouring disease that she does. Even if I am brought to a noble, it's not a guarantee that I'll be able to immediately form a contract. I actually feel a little self-conscious over how much she's worrying about me, if her feeling that this needs to be quickly rushed through is being amplified by her overbearing nature.

I chuckle, returning Freida's even stare.

"You know, Freida. After thinking about it a lot, I decided that I want to be with my family, even if it means wasting away."

"...Huh?"

Freida freezes up, her eyes wide and mouth open. Her lips tremble, just a little, and she weakly mutters, "I can't believe it..."

"I've halfway given up already. Since Tuuli started crying, I told her that I'd keep looking for some way to survive somehow, but there's no other way to live with the devouring except to make a contract with a noble, is there?"

I'm sure that the guild leader, in order to save his granddaughter, would have used every scrap of his influence, his money, his connections, and every other useful thing he had to frantically search for every solution he could. He would have bought some time by gathering up magical tools in order to keep searching for any better method than making a contract. Not finding anything, he must have given up on his search and turned towards finding a noble who would grant a contract with the most favorable conditions, thinking that that was the only way forward. The answer is obvious.

"...I don't know of any."

"Honestly, I've been wondering if I might be able to find another magical tool somewhere that I could use, but I don't think I want to make a contract with a noble. There's no substitute for magical tools if I want to do something about the devouring, is there?"

"If I knew of anything, I'd already be using it."

She gives me an irritated glare, and I shrug my shoulders.

"I know, right? So, the question I wanted to ask you today is if it's possible at all to buy magical tools from someone who isn't a noble? Or maybe, could I make magical tools on my own, or something... that's not possible, is it?"

I was thinking that if I couldn't find any magical tools then I should try making some myself, but, unfortunately, none of the books I'd read as Urano contained any methods for creating magical tools. These concepts did exist in fantasy novels and games, but I don't think that I can use any of those as reference material. Also, there's no workshop here in the city that produces magical tools.

"You need mana in order to make magical tools, and since only the nobility have mana, they're the only ones who can make them. So, the only people who know the methods for making magical tools are behind those castle walls."

"Alright. ...I'd been thinking that if I knew how to make them then I could just do it myself, but I guess it really is impossible."

If only mana-possessing nobles could make them, then any workshop for making them would be on the other side of those tall ramparts. I'd been hoping that if I could just learn the manufacturing methods, then I could use all of my funds to make *something* happen, but I guess I really was just being naïve, after all.

"...I hadn't even considered making my own," says Freida.

"That's because you're from a rich family," I say, giggling. "In my world, if I decide that I want something, then if I don't make it myself I won't ever get it, so the very first thing I thought of was whether or not I could figure out how to make it myself... you know."

Rinsham, paper, soot pencils, and chopsticks were all things that I needed, so I was driven to make them myself, as much as I was able.

"Is your family that important to you?" she asks, quietly. "You're not scared of being swallowed up by the fever?"

"Umm, how do I put this. I don't want to die, but I'm not really scared of it, I don't think."

I've already died once. Being able to live out Maïne's life is just a bonus granted to me by God. I finally managed to make my life actually fun to live, but that opinion hasn't fundamentally changed.

"...I don't have any books right now, so my family is the only important thing I have. I'm not choosing to die, I'm choosing to be with my family. That's all."

"Books?"

“Yeah. I’ve actually saved up quite a bit of money, so I wonder if I could buy one, maybe?”

I tilt my head, pondering, while Freida gives me a worried smile.

“If books are what you’re after, then shouldn’t you go to the nobles’ quarter after all? There should be many there, should there not?”

“Aaah, if a contract said that I could read books as much as I wanted, then I’d probably sign it on the spot, but do you really think a nobleman that would keep me around as a pet would let a poor commoner like me read something so valuable?”

“The more I think about your living conditions, the more difficult they seem.”

From a noble’s perspective, I’m just a commoner from a city with a low literacy rate. Even though I know how to read, it still wouldn’t be out of the ordinary for them not to want me to touch any of the expensive, precious books that they themselves own. If I were to read them on my own, then they’d surely get mad. Plus, to a certain extent, I know myself. If there’s a book in front of me, there’s a good chance that I’ll lose all sense of reason. I can easily imagine myself leaping at a book and provoking someone’s wrath.

“...So, I’ve been thinking that, until I die, I want to try to set up some way to mass-produce books, but this seems really hard. When I think about how short my lifespan is thanks to the devouring, I get halfway to just giving up. I’m causing so much trouble for my family, so right now I want to earn as much money as I can so that I can leave it behind for them when I’m gone.”

As I light-heartedly joke about this, Freida’s light brown eyes suddenly flash with light.

“Then, perhaps you’d like to sell me the rights to your pound cake recipe?”

I look at Freida, whose eyes definitely have that merchant’s gleam now, and hum thoughtfully to myself. A pound cake is a very basic kind of sweet, but perhaps a time-limited monopoly might not be a big problem. Permanently giving her all the rights, like I did with Benno and the rinsham, would be problematic. It would undoubtedly get in the way of developing and spreading new sweets.

“...If I were to ask for five small gold coins for the right to monopolize sales on pound cake for one year, how would that sound?”

“I’d take that offer, of course.”

She didn't even hesitate for a moment.

"...What do you mean, 'of course'? Did I make it too cheap?"

"Yes, that's right. The rights to monopolize sales on a completely unprecedented new good, like pound cake or plant-based paper, could easily be worth more than a large gold coin."

"A large gold coin..."

Once again, it seems like Benno might have conned me into selling him all of my information for dirt cheap.

"Would you like to raise the price?"

"Nah, that's fine. It's only for a year, after all. I'll sell you monopoly rights for five small gold coins."

I'm not comfortable with raising a price after I already made my offer, so I shake my head.

"Well then, let's write up a contract."

"Huh? You mean, a magical contract?!"

Did this just get real scary? Am I going to have to see blood again and put innocent bystanders at risk? I start trembling uncontrollably, but Freida just lets out an amazed sigh.

"...Maïne. Contract magic is not something that you can use so easily. It's something that you use when your opponent has both overwhelming magical and political power, putting you at an enormous disadvantage, and you need to use an extremely expensive magical tool in order to secure your profits. In our case, a regular contract written on formal contract parchment would be sufficient, would it not?"

"I guess you're right."

Since my first ever contract was a magical one, I guess my intuition might have been a little skewed. However, if what Freida is saying is correct, then why would Benno use a magical contract with Lutz and I, who possess neither magical nor political power? This is a mystery.

"Nevertheless, how do *you* know about magical contracts, since they're so rarely

used?"

"...Mister Benno will get mad if I tell you, so it's a secret."

"Oh my, you're learning, aren't you!"

She giggles to herself as she reaches for a bell on a nearby table. When she rings it, Jutte slips into the room, making barely a sound.

"Please get a written contract ready for us," says Freida.

On the parchment that Jutte prepares for us, Freida uses a feather pen to outline the terms of our contract. Compared to the wooden pen that I bought, her quill certainly does look impressive, but I wonder if it's just my imagination that it looks hard to use? To Freida, who is an apprentice at the merchant's guild, this is ordinary, everyday work. For me, having been here for a while, this is something I'm at least familiar with. After we go over the contract to make sure there's no discrepancies, we touch our guild cards together to finalize the deal.

"Why did you decide on a year?" asks Freida.

"After a year, everyone will know that your shop is where pound cake was invented, won't they? Also, by then, I think sugar will have spread around to more people, so I'm trying to leave some room for new entries into the market."

"New entries?"

"If the recipe is announced, then the number of competitors will multiply, and we'll quickly start seeing new kinds of sweets, won't we? Delicious sweets make people happy, so if there's a lot of different people making them, and they start spreading everywhere, then I think that'll be a good thing."

"Hah, you really don't care at all about your own profits, Maïne. Being a merchant doesn't suit you."

Freida and I sign our names at the bottom of the contract parchment. With that, the contract between me and Freida to guarantee her monopoly rights for a year is complete.

"But, well, me announcing the recipe in a year does require that I'm actually around then, doesn't it? If I'm not, then I'll leave that job to you."

"Hmph! I put my own profits above all else. If you want that recipe announced, then you'd better still be here next year to announce it yourself!"

She huffs, turning her head away. She looks like she might be on the verge of tears.

Chapter 65

Baptismal Procession

The morning of my baptismal ceremony is busy, particularly for my mother. She has to put together breakfast, tidy up after it, and get both her and my father into their only set of nice clothes, so if I were to sleep in or chew sluggishly on my food, she'd get mad at me. Thus, I cram my breakfast down my throat so fast I feel I might choke, and while she's tidying up I retreat to the bedroom with Tuuli so that I can get changed.

Thanks to both Tuuli and my mother gradually making little additions to it here and there, my dress isn't just fluttery because of the extra fabric that's been pinned back. The two of them had used their skills at making lacework flowers, honed by a winter's worth of handiwork, to decorate the dress with little flowers here and there, and now it's almost excessively decorated. If Benno hadn't let me keep the leftover thread from our winter handiwork, they probably wouldn't have had the materials to do this with, I think.

My fluttery one piece dress rustles as I pull it on over my head like a t-shirt. I wrap the blue sash around my waist, and tie it tightly into a bow. The ends of it hang limply down past my shins.

"Maïne, didn't you have to double that up?" says Tuuli, frowning.

I untie the sash, and try wrapping it around myself twice. However, even though I'd been able to tie it off last winter, it's just a little bit too short now, so I can't make it into a good-looking bow.

"Huh? Have I been eating too much? Did I get a little chubby?"

"Oh, no! You just grew a little bigger."

"Huh? I grew bigger?"

"Probably, yeah. Look, we'd made the dress so that it would hang below your knees, but now it's only halfway down your knees instead. You got a little bigger!"

It seems that I've gotten a little taller in the space between winter and summer. If I were a normal child, this would be an obvious thing to have happen, but since my

devouring is causing me to grow excessively slowly, I've never really felt as if I'm growing much at all. I stand there, deeply moved, trembling with joy, but Tuuli is a little more pragmatic. She stares at ends of the sash, contemplating how everything fits together.

"...No matter how I look at it, the length just isn't going to work. It'll look untidy either way. Maybe we should cut it?"

"Oh no," I say, "that would be a waste. It'll look fine as it is, so there's no need to cut it. I'll just double it up."

"That didn't work, though?"

"I won't wrap it around *myself* twice, I'll just double up the bow."

I wrap the sash around myself, then at my stomach tie a tight, two-fold, butterfly bow. Then, to complete the look, I rotate the sash until the bow is at my back, like when I put on a kimono.

"How does it look?" I ask. "Is the length okay?"

"So cute! That's amazing! How did you do that?!"

"Umm, well..."

As I try to figure out how best to explain it, my mother barges into the room.

"If you're done changing, then get your hair done up. I'm getting changed now."

"Okaay! I'll tell you later, Tuuli."

I quickly go out to the kitchen and start working on my hair. Last night, my entire family used some rinsham, so today everyone's hair is smooth and glossy. Unusually, my father had looked like he wanted to be included in this, so I helped wash his hair too. When I tried asking why he was suddenly so interested, he said it was because Otto was bragging about how Corinna had washed his hair. Looks like he was a bit envious of that kind of life satisfaction.

"Let me do that for you, Maïne."

As I start combing out my hair, Tuuli comes over, her eyes sparkling. It looks like since I'd done her hair for her on the day of her baptismal ceremony, she wanted to return the favor today.

"Since you do the twirly thing with your hair ornaments, I can't help you there, so at

least let me comb your hair for you.”

“Okay! Thanks.”

I hand over the comb and Tuuli gets to work, humming to herself. She seems to be in a really good mood.

“Your hair is so straight. It’s really beautiful! It smells good, too.”

“Your hair smells the same, you know?”

When Tuuli finishes, I thank her, then reach for my hairpin, my hair swaying behind me. I pick up the hairpin, careful not to crush the delicate-looking flowers, and then put my hair up as I usually do. Even if I’d thought about trying a more elaborate hairstyle, my hair can’t really be tied up with a string, so it would all quickly come undone.

“Alright then...”

Even though I’m using a different hairpin, I’m doing my hair the same way I always do, so I’m done with it almost immediately. This hairpin is somewhat heavier than the simple rod I usually use, and I can tell that whenever I shake my head the little flowers hanging off of it sway back and forth. When I start having a little fun shaking my head a bit, Tuuli claps excitedly.

“Whoa, cute!” says Tuuli. “That matches your hair color perfectly! And it’s so wonderful watching it sway whenever you move.”

“That suits you very well, Maïne,” says my mother.

“You look like a princess,” says my dad. “You’ll be the cutest kid at the entire ceremony!”



My parents, both finished changing, come out of the bedroom and start complimenting me on how nice I look in my new dress. I'm happy for all of this open, unreserved praise, but it's also a little embarrassing, too.

"Hey, Daddy, isn't that what you told Tuuli, too?"

"Of course it is!" he says, grabbing me and Tuuli in each of his arms. "I've got the cutest two daughters in the whole wide world."

Tuuli and I shriek, trying to free ourselves. He cackles, refusing to let us go.

"Aaah! You'll mess up my hair!"

"Enough of that!" says my mother. "If you've got enough time to fool around, then go and get outside already."

My father immediately lets us go as soon as she says that, but it's too late. As I catch my breath, my mother looks me over, sighing.

"Maïne, you'll need to re-do your hair," she says.

"Sorry 'bout that," says my father, shrugging apologetically.

I smile at him, then pull out my hairpin, shake out my hair, stick it back in, and fix it. Sure, my hair can't ever be done in any sort of extremely elaborate hairdo, but thanks to its peculiar smoothness, even if it gets a little ruffled all it takes is a little bit of hand combing to sort it back out.

"Looks like everyone's starting to gather outside," says Tuuli, opening the front door wide and waving us over. We go downstairs and head out into the plaza around the well, where many of our neighbors have already started to gather.

"Oh, there's Ralph and the others. Looks like Lutz is wearing Ralph's hand-me-downs, too."

I look over at where she's pointing, and see Lutz, indeed wearing Ralph's nicest hand-me-downs, surrounded by a large number of people. Since I didn't actually see Ralph on his baptismal day, I wouldn't have been able to tell that they were hand-me-downs if I hadn't been told, though. Lutz is wearing a white shirt and pants, with a light blue sash tied around his waist. If I had to guess, this was probably made for Zasha, the oldest child in the family. Both the sash and the embroidery look like they'd match Zasha a lot better.

“Lutz—”

“Oh my, Maïne?! What is with that dress?! You look like a very rich little girl, don’t you!”

Before I can get to him, Auntie Karla catches me. Her loud, resounding voice quickly draws the attention of everyone around us.

“They’re Tuuli’s hand-me-downs,” I say.

“*Those* are hand-me-downs?!”

“Yeah. It was way too loose around the shoulders, so we gathered it up here and here and added straps, then there was extra cloth on the sides so we added some pleats here, and then it was too long so we rolled it up and sewed it in place. That’s all, just some really simple alterations.”

As I give a quick explanation, the nearby women all gather round, jostling each other as they try to get a better look. Since I’m far shorter than the average child of my age, they all have to stoop down to see. Being surrounded by all these people staring down at me from above is actually a little scary. I unconsciously reach behind me and grab tightly to my mother’s skirt.

“Hmm! This doesn’t look like it was an alteration at all. It looks quite splendid!”

“Oh, let me see! Aha, I see, you could do this because Tuuli and Maïne are so different in build. That won’t work in our family...”

“Ahahah, I’d thought the sash was a bit extravagant, but it was too long so you had to double it up, didn’t you?”

As all these people are chattering amongst themselves however they like, they occasionally throw a “congratulations” or a “happy baptism day” at me, but they all feel very perfunctory.

“And this hairpin! It’s so elaborate, isn’t it? This must have been so expensive.”

When they point out how pricey my hairpin must have been, my mother just laughs, shaking her head.

“We made it ourselves, so it wasn’t very expensive at all. Since I was able to alter this dress to fit her, I had all sorts of thread leftover that I thought I’d need in order to make her own dress, so we used that.”

“Really? My daughter said that she’d wanted me to buy her one of these for her

baptism. Do you think you could teach me how to make them?”

“You’ll need some very, very fine needles to make it work. If you can get a pair of those, the rest is easy.”

I hadn’t expected her to interrupt at all! She’s managed to redirect everyone’s attention towards herself. Now that she’s the one getting flooded with questions, I quietly manage to slip away through the crowd of older women. Looks like having just a slightly different dress and a slightly different hairpin really did make me the target of a lot of interest after all.

Alright, escape complete.

The instant I let myself breathe a sigh of a relief, however, I immediately find myself surrounded by a ton of girls interested in both my clothes and my hairpin. These are all slightly older girls, who’d already had their baptisms by the time I was finally able to go to the forest. Aside from Tuuli, I didn’t really have any contact with these people.

“Aaah, so cute!!”

“Let me see, let me see! Whoa, Tuuli made this, right? Amazing!”

A girl who seems like she’s spent some time with Tuuli rudely grabs at my hairpin. It smoothly slides out and my hair falls down around me.

“Ah!”

“Oh, I’m, I’m sorry! What do I do...”

She turns green, clutching my hairpin, mortified that she’d just destroyed a hairstyle that must have taken ages to put together. I hold out my hand, though, smiling sweetly.

“It’s okay! I can fix it.”

She gives me my hairpin back, and I get to work fixing my hair. I quickly comb it out, wrap it tightly around the pin, and with a twist, secure it in place.

“Huh? What? What did you just do?! That’s no ordinary decoration, is it?”

“Eh heh heh,” says Tuuli, “It’s just a decoration, yet it can hold hair in place. My little sister is really amazing, after all!”

Tuuli, for some reason, puffs up her chest proudly. After that, everyone takes turns

admiring my two-fold bow and pinching my dress here and there, all the while Tuuli triumphantly explains everything. Everyone seems to be having a lot of fun, but ultimately everything they're saying and doing is exactly what the older women had been saying and doing too.

I somehow slip away from that crowd as well, and breathe another sigh. Now that I'm finally not surrounded by so many unfamiliar faces, I suddenly realize just how tired I am. I start heading towards Lutz, hoping to find some place to take a breather.

"Lu~utz..."

"Oh, Maïne! Looks like you finally got away from Mom—"

He turns around to look at me and suddenly freezes.

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"Uh, nothing. Umm—"

"Whoa, what's with that dress? That looks totally different from Tuuli's."

Ralph appears, pushing Lutz aside.

"We just altered Tuuli's dress from bef— gaah! Zasha, put me down!"

"Congratulations, Maïne! You're so tiny and cute. Way cuter than cheeky Lutz here!"

"Maïne, happy baptism. That dress really suits you! But, man, you're really tiny. You barely even look like you should be getting baptized today, huh?"

"I've gotten a little bigger! Not that you'd be able to tell, though!"

I'd sought out Lutz so I could finally relax, but now I'm surrounded by all of his older brothers. Lutz flushes red with embarrassment, and chases his brothers off.

"Oh no, Zasha! Maïne's looking kinda ill!"

"Whoa, Maïne. Hang in there. The ceremony hasn't even started, right?!"

Still held in Zasha's arms, I let myself go limp. Zasha, who'll come of age next year, already has the kind of stability a full-grown adult would have.

"I wanna go home..." I whine.

"We haven't even left," says Lutz.



The temple bells start to ring in the distance, their rhythmic chiming resounding through the town. It's the signal that it's time to head towards the temple. Out of all of our neighbors who use the same well we do, the only children getting baptized this season are Lutz and myself. The two of us are quickly surrounded by cheering adults.

"Maïne, let's go! Onwards to the main street!"

With a jerk, my father lifts me out of Zasha's arms and takes off towards the main street, at the head of the pack. After a moment, Lutz frantically chases after us. Over my father's shoulder, I can see our families, as well as the other adults, following behind. In the street ahead, just like when Tuuli had her ceremony, I see children emerging from alleyways here and there, followed by their families. Then, crowds of spectators start pouring out, until the edges of the street are covered in people.

"Are you okay, Maïne?" asks my father.

"Umm... maybe?"

In the distance, I can hear the sound of cheering grow louder. It seems like the procession is drawing near.

"Rest until we get you to the temple," he says.

"Okay, I will. Thanks, Daddy."

It seems like my father will be carrying me all the way to the temple. After all, I can't walk at the speed everyone else will be going at, and if I collapse in the middle of the procession, the whole thing will be ruined.

Behind the slowly-growing column of children dressed in white, their families follow behind. It looks like my father is going to try to put himself right at the end of the line of children, in the front row of parents. However, if Lutz stands here with us, he probably won't be able to see anything but the people immediately around him.

"Lutz, do you want to go on ahead?"

"Nah, if we're split up, then when we get to the temple I'd have to search for you, so I'll stay here."

"Then, maybe you could walk near the edge? So that you can see Mister Benno's shop on our way past."

“...Yeah, good idea.”

As I watch, the procession starts to pass us by. My father steps forward, me held in his arms, and Lutz follows us, joining the procession. From my tall vantage point, I can see everything around me, unlike during Tuuli’s ceremony, when I’d been completely buried. On both sides of the main street, people are waving hugely at us, whistling shrilly, and showering us with blessings. The windows of the buildings that overlook the streets have been thrown open wide, and groups of people lean out of each, shouting congratulations down at us. The children ahead of us smile widely, filled to bursting with pride, and wave back at the people along the streets and in the windows.

“Maïne,” says my father, “make sure you wave back at everyone. You’re saying thanks.”
“Oh, I see!”

With my father’s prompting, I let go of him with one of my arms, and, with a smile, start to wave. I try to pattern my waving after the way members of the Imperial Family back in Japan would respond to cheers with their gentle smiles.

Yes, just like that! With elegance and grace!

Even if I had the determination, this isn’t the kind of smiling or waving that I could suddenly figure out how to do on my own, but if I have something to model it after, then copying that isn’t a problem at all. Plus, in this town, there’s nobody to laugh at me for mimicking the Imperial Family. So, I smile as elegantly as I possibly can, and wave my hand in the most gentle, elegant manner that I can muster.

Whoa, people are pointing, am I standing out too much?!

I don’t know if it’s because being carried by my father makes me too conspicuous or not, but I feel like I might be attracting too much attention. But, since everyone’s looking at the procession, I don’t think there’s any way that I’m the only one drawing attention here, though.

“Maïne,” says my father, “my arm’s getting a little tired. I’m going to switch.”
“Okay,” I reply.

While we wait in the central plaza for the processions from the other streets to arrive, my father shifts his posture. I’ve already seen everything up until this point during Tuuli’s ceremony. After everyone has gathered in the central plaza, we’ll start

proceeding towards the temple that sits in front of the castle ramparts.

From the central plaza, I can see that the temple is a building made of white stone that stands taller than the city's outer walls. In fact, it's as tall as the castle ramparts themselves. It's a large, splendid building, but between the long, narrow windows that line its surface and the fact that it's built so that it's almost jutting out from the castle walls themselves, I can't help but wonder if it was originally used as a fortress or if it was even part of the castle walls themselves.

Hmm, although, did they really take a building designed for soldiers to use and use it for religious purposes instead? In wartime, the temple probably sends out people to provide aid, but in ordinary times, they could probably build something like that with all the offerings, donations, and whatever other ways they could squeeze money out of their believers...

Since the only knowledge that I can base any of this speculation off of is what I know from Japan, no matter how much I think about it I can't actually be sure of anything. However, up until now, I haven't really thought at all about this institution they call "the temple", and haven't seen anything that even remotely resembles its architectural style or appearance, so it's kind of fun to try to puzzle my way around it.

Now that everyone's gathered, we start proceeding towards the temple. From this point on, both the people along the sides of the road as well as the children who join the procession are wearing noticeably different things. It's clear that the cloth itself is worth a lot of money, and even though the outfits are still basically all white, the cuffs and hems are all lavishly embroidered.

After we walk a little ways, Benno's shop comes into sight. Lined up in front, I can see Benno, Mark, Otto, and Corinna, all surrounded by other familiar faces from the shop.

"Lutz, I can see Mister Benno and Mister Mark! Mister Otto and Miss Corinna are there too to congratulate us."

"Seriously?"

Unlike me, who can see at the same level of my father, Lutz is in the middle of the procession, so it seems like he still can't see Benno's shop. When he finally spots it, he grins hugely and waves. Mark waves back, and all of the other employees follow suit, all shouting out as one.

“Lutz, Maïne, congratulations!”

I’m a little startled to suddenly stand out so much, but I’m thrilled to be congratulated by everyone, and I give them a huge wave back. With my spirits as high as they are, there isn’t a trace of Imperial dignity left. Otto embraces Corinna with his left hand and waves at us with his right. Corinna waves at us as well, smiling gently.

“Make sure you stop by to say thanks on your way back from the temple,” says my father to Lutz, reaching down to ruffle his hair as he walks beside us.

The two of us, of course, nod emphatically.

“Hey, Maïne,” says Lutz. “Do you think Master Benno looks a little shocked?”
“You noticed it too, huh?”

Amidst all of his broadly smiling and waving employees, Benno stands alone, staring at us, rubbing his temples and scowling.

Hmmm, knowing Benno, isn’t that the same look he gives me whenever I do something really unnecessary? Did I somehow do something wrong again?

We draw closer and closer to the temple, and the details of the white building I’d been observing from far away slowly start to come into view. Reliefs have been carved along the walls, and on both sides of the entrance there are four statues carved of stone lined up. Whether these are statues of this city’s gods or just ordinary decorations, I can’t really say.

While my vision was occupied by the sight of the front of the procession starting to enter the temple, we’d started pass Freida’s house. The guild master and his family have all taken positions along the side of the street. I even see Ilse and Jutte there too.

“Congratulations, Maïne!”
“Thank you!”

The people I know call out to me, waving. I wave back at them, and yell back.

“Freida!”

The guild master has Freida in his arms, like my father is carrying me. She looks a little

shocked as she smiles and waves back at me.

“Maïne, you look wonderful!” she yells. Amongst all of the cheering, I can just barely hear her.

Before the several stairs that lead into the temple, guardsmen stand, looking imposing. They wear blue clothing underneath what appear to be simple pieces of armor. I can see fine ornamentation on it, and it is polished to the point where it gleams in the light. Coupled with the fact that their clothing is glossy as well, it seems clear that even this is ceremonial.

The enormous double doors loom over us, towering taller than two grown men. Both the doors and the thick wooden gate they’re set into, are crafted expertly and carved intricately. The gates have been opened wide, and beyond them I can see a long white stone plaza stretching ahead. At the end of it is a large, five-story building, and to either side are smaller three-story buildings, all tied together by walkways. All three buildings are built from the same white stone, but only the one in the center has been decorated with carvings and reliefs.

“Well, this is as far as parents go. Lutz, take care of Maïne for me.”

“Yeah, leave it to me.”

My father sets me down. I take Lutz’s hand, and we walk, at the tail end of the procession, towards the enormous doors. As even the most loudly excited kids start to quiet down as soon as we pass through the doors, the noise gradually starts to abate.

“Hey, Maïne.”

Lutz’s voice reverberates much more than I expected. I turn to look at him. “What?” I say, keeping my voice down, leaning in close as if I’m trying to hear a secret. Lutz keeps looking forward, but leans closer to my ear, and speaks in little more than a whisper.

“That dress and that hairpin really suit you. You’re shockingly cute.”

When everyone else praised me like that, I always just smiled back and thanked them as normal, but somehow, having this whispered into my right before entering a temple destroys my usual reaction.

“Um? Uh? Why, now...”

I instinctively look up at him, and see him smiling a genuine smile, as if he hadn't a care in the world.

“My brothers said it before I could back there, so I figured I should wait until they weren't around.”

“Ah... oh... is that it? Then, thank you!”

I put one hand on my chest to try and still my leaping heart, and, holding hands, Lutz and I walk together into the temple.

Since we're the last people through, even if nobody could hear what we were saying our entire exchange was visible to the people behind us. The fact that the crowd behind us had yelled “wow, cute! It's like they're getting married,” and my father had been gnashing his teeth as he saw us off is something I only learn after the ceremony is over.

Chapter 66

A Quiet Uproar

The shrill voices of the children who entered before us echo throughout the temple, ringing so loudly within the walls that I feel a headache coming on. I stop walking, unintentionally, and Lutz tugs gently on my hand, pulling me forward.

“Watch your step, there’s some stairs,” he says.

“Okay,” I reply.

As I take a few steps forward, watching my step, I hear a heavy groaning sound from behind me as the doors start to close. Startled by the shadow suddenly passing beneath me, I turn around to see gray-robed priests pushing the doors shut.

“Ah, that’s right, we were the last ones through, so...”

When the doors are shut tight, a blue-robed priest slowly walks in front of it. He waves some sort of wind chime-like bell, attached to which is a strangely-colored stone. It jingles. In the next instant, the voices of the other children disappear, as do their echoes, leaving only the faintest ringing that quickly fades to silence.

“What was that...?”

Lutz’s voice doesn’t come out. Or, more accurately, nothing more than a whisper comes out. Judging by his facial expression and posture, I think he’d tried to speak in a normal tone of voice, louder than what actually came out. He looks shocked at how little sound he made, touching his throat.

“Maybe it’s a magical tool?” I say. “It happened as soon as that blue priest rang that bell.”

As I expected, my voice doesn’t come out any louder than a whisper either. However, since I’d seen the moment the priest rang the bell, I was able to figure out what had happened and stay calm. When I say this, Lutz relaxes, breathing a sigh of relief. Now that he knows it’s not just him, and that there was a reason for it, he calms himself

down.

I sigh in admiration, then face forward again, looking along the long line of the procession ahead of us. The interior of the temple is like an atrium, long and with a high ceiling. The walls on both sides of the room are covered in intricate carvings, and thick, round pillars are lined up regularly along them. Tall windows, stretching nearly four stories high, line the walls in even intervals, letting long, straight shafts of light into the room. Both the walls and the pillars are white, with the exception of gold ornamentation here and there, and even in the dim light they still seem bright. The only place rich with color is the far end of the room.

Unlike the Christian churches I'd seen in collections of photographs and art museums, there are no frescoes or stained glass windows. The white stone construction makes the room feel very unlike a Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple, and the colors don't match any of the vibrant shades from southeast Asia.

On the innermost wall, a multicolored mosaic stretches from the floor all the way to the ceiling, bearing an intricate pattern. It glimmers where it's hit by sunlight from the side, reminding me just a little bit of a mosque for a moment, but there are stairs, too, over forty of them, going from the floor to nearly the height of the window. The stone statues that are arranged on the way up only reinforce how alien this all is.

Perhaps these stairs are meant to evoke the idea of climbing towards heaven and the gods? Something about the statues lined up at the top of the stairs remind me of the dolls we put out for Girls' Day, though...²

On the upper-most stair, there are two statues next to each other, one man and one woman. Based on how they're arranged, they give me the impression that they're a married pair. Between that and the fact that they're on the highest stair, I think they're probably the highest-ranked gods in this religion. Even though they're made of white stone, the male god is draped in a glittering black mantle set with countless golden stars, and the female goddess wears a golden crown, with long, tapered spines coming off of it like rays of light.

Perhaps this is the goddess of light and god of darkness? Or perhaps the goddess of the sun and the god of the night? Either way, the mantle and the crown stand out.

A few steps below that, there's a stone statue of a slightly plump, gentle-looking woman, holding a golden chalice that glitters with gemstones. Below her, there's a

woman holding a staff, a man holding a spear, a woman holding a shield, and a man holding a sword. They're all made of the same white stone, but the fact that they're each holding just one brightly-colored item makes this even more mysterious to me. These statues were made to hold real things; is there some meaning to that?

Something like a Holy Grail or a Holy Sword, perhaps?

On the steps below that, there are flowers, fruits, bundles of cloth, and other offerings laid out. The more I look, the more it really does remind me of Girls' Day.

"Maïne, don't just stand and stare, keep walking!"

"Hm? Oh! Sorry, sorry."

Lutz tugs me forward, and I hurry a little bit to keep up with the end of the procession. The path down the center of the room is clear so that we can walk though, but on either side thick red carpets are spread out, spaced about one meter apart from each other.

At the front of the room, there are a number of desks, where a number of priests garbed in blue seem to be performing some sort of procedure. The children who finish going through that procedure are guided by gray-clothed priests to either side of the room. They're led to spots on the carpet, from the outside of the walls in, and told to take their shoes off before sitting down.

As the procession slowly makes its way forward, either something happens or Lutz notices something new. "Geh," he says, grimacing, as he looks ahead at whatever he's seeing.

"What's wrong, Lutz? Is something happening at the front?"

"...Ahh..."

After waffling for a moment, as if he's trying to figure out how to say something difficult, he lets out a defeated sigh, then looks over at me.

"It's a blood seal, like you hate."

"Wh... what?"

"Some kind of magical tool, I think. Everyone's thumbs are getting pricked and they're pushing their blood onto it."

I'd much rather I hadn't heard that, but now there's nothing left for me to do but do a sharp about-face and immediately get right out of there. Lutz, however, grabs my hand tightly and refuses to let me go.

"Give up," he says. "This looks like some sort of registration thing. I'd bet this is related to that citizenship thing, right?"

"Urgh... yeah, you're right. I think that's probably it."

Otto and Benno had both told me that after my baptismal ceremony was over, I'd be acknowledged as a resident of this town and granted citizenship rights. In other words, if I can't get through this ritual, no matter how bad it may be, then I can't get my citizenship.

"...Why do magical tools like blood so much?" I ask.

"Dunno," he replies.

Every single time I have to use a magic tool, it involves cutting open my finger and making blood on it. No matter how many times I do it, I'll never be able to get used to the pain of it. When I look ahead to see what the other children are going through, I see brusque blue-robed priests jabbing their fingers with needles, then pushing those fingers firmly into what look like medallions of flat white stone. Those kids have their mouths open in what look like screams of pain, but I can't hear anything coming from them at all. Seeing them clutching their sore fingers while being lead away towards the carpets has me trembling in fear.

"Next please, this way," says a priest.

The line of people in front of me has thinned out, and a voice calls out from one of the empty desks. Lutz pushes me forward, and I start heading towards where I'm being called. The blue-robed priest smiles at me a little, looking me up and down, and then holds out his hand.

"Please hold out your hand, palm up. I'm going to prick your finger, but it'll only hurt a little bit."

Of course, the thing he said wouldn't hurt does, in fact, hurt. The instant the needle pricks my finger, I feel a sharp pain, like being poked by something very hot, and a fat, red drop of blood wells up on my fingertip. Between the pain and seeing my blood, I can *feel* myself going deathly pale.

“Smear that blood on here, if you would.”

Unlike the priest I’d seen earlier, who’d been roughly forcing kids’ fingers into place, this priest just guides my hand over to a small medallion-like object. It seems like just gently smearing my blood onto its surface was good enough, leaving me relieved that the process wasn’t nearly as painful as I thought it would be.

I’m glad that this priest wasn’t anywhere near as violent, but my finger still really stings!

I wonder, had that magical tool that had been used to quiet us down not actually been used to stop our chattering from resounding through the temple, but to stop our screams of agony?

“You two are the last ones through. This way, please.”

We’re called over by a gray-robed priest who, despite being an adult, seems to still have a little immaturity left in him. Lutz and I start walking towards the carpet. After being instructed to take off our shoes, we do so, and then sit down on the carpet. Amongst all of the kids who are either sitting cross-legged or with their feet splayed out in front of them, I’m the only one sitting with my legs propped up, like I’m back in PE class in elementary school³. Being in such a wide-open, gymnasium-like space, surrounded by other children my age, makes me feel like this is the only correct way to be sitting.

“Maïne, why’re you curled into a ball like that?”

“It’s not a ball, it’s a triangle,” I explain. “It’s called triangular sitting.”

“Huh? A triangle? Where?”

“Like this,” I say, gesturing.

As the two of us chat, the blue-robed priests, having finished registering everyone, collectively step back behind the desks. After they carry all of the boxes that they had been putting our registration medallions in out of the room, the gray-robed priests burst into action, bustling about as they start getting ready for the next phase. They carry out the desks, and in its place they bring out a much more extravagant altar and place it in front of the steps.

The blue-robed priests come back into the room, lining themselves up on either side

of the altar, and at roughly the same time the gray-robed priests line up along the walls where we're sitting, seemingly finished with their preparation work. The way they're standing behind us reminds me of teachers keeping watch over students at a school assembly, and I take extra care to make sure I'm sitting up properly in my triangle.

"The head priest enters," intone the blue-robed priests, waving the rods they're holding. The sound of countless bells rings out, and an old man, dressed in white robes with a golden sash crossing his shoulder, slowly enters the room, carrying something. With careful, deliberate footsteps, he makes his way to the altar, upon which he gently sets the thing he was carrying.

Is... that... a book?!

I rub frantically at my eyes in disbelief, looking again and again to make sure that my eyes aren't deceiving me. When I see the head priest start to slowly turn the pages, I'm convinced. That is, beyond the shadow of any doubt, a book. It feels like a bible, or some other form of holy scriptures.

"Lutz, a book! That's a book!"

I poke him excitedly on the shoulder. He had been fidgeting constantly, unused to sitting on the ground. He cranes his neck to see.

"Where? Where do you see it?"

"Look, there, the thing the head priest is holding. That!"

It looks like it is bound in leather, and the easily-damaged corners are reinforced with finely-worked gold. I can see from here that it's studded with small gemstones, as well.

"That's a book? Whoa, that looks expensive. That's nothing like the one that you've been making."

"There's not a whole lot in common between a book like that, which has a lot of artistic value, and what I'm making, which is mostly practical. It's like comparing the sword that that statue is carrying to your knife."

"Ahh, I see. Even so, aren't you surprised to see something like that here?"

"...I'm not surprised at all, actually. If you think about it, it's actually pretty obvious."

As an ordinary Japanese woman with no particularly strong interest in religion, I'd never even considered going near the temple, but in a religious institution like this,

there would of course be some way to collect all of the scripture, holy texts, bibles, and various teachings in one place. There would be *books*. Even if my body doesn't let me move the way I want, even if I didn't have any money, even if I didn't desperately try to make them myself, books definitely exist.

If the merchant's guild is on the cutting edge of gathering information, then the temple must be on the cutting edge of theology, mathematics, music, arts, and all of the other fields of study that could bring them closer to the gods. The Christian church had fostered scholarship like that, and in Japan Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines had been places where people gathered to learn from leading intellectuals.

"Aaaaaargh, I should have come here earlier! Why didn't I think of this?! I'm such an idiot! I could have been reading books without going through all this trouble!!"

It's probably for the best that my voice isn't getting any louder no matter how much I scream. As I cry out from deep in my heart, Lutz looks at me in amazement, then just shrugs his shoulders.

"So, it looks like you've completely forgotten, but they don't let kids who haven't gone through their baptismal ceremonies into the temple, you know? Even if you'd thought of it right away and come here, the gatekeepers wouldn't have let you in."

Now that he mentions it, he's right. The only children who can enter the temple are those who've already been baptized.

"But, to just happen to go to the temple and come across a book on the day of my own baptismal ceremony, couldn't that be fate?"

"Everybody goes to the temple when they turn seven, Maïne. Fate has nothing to do with it."

"Ugh, *Lutz!* Stop picking everything apart like that!"

"I know you're excited about there being a book here, but calm down. It'll be a big problem if you pass out here."

Lutz seems to think I'm a little too excited and is trying to calm me down.

"Huh? But, there's a book so close. Not getting even a little bit excited is completely impossible, you know?"

"Even if it's impossible, you have to. I mean, that's not a book that they'd ever let you read, right?"

“Ah... that’s right.”

Even though there’s a book, it’s not a book that I can ever touch. There’s no way that I’d ever be allowed to read a book wrapped in leather and studded with gemstones. As soon as I realize this, my excitement quickly dissipates, and my head drops dejectedly.

“Today, you are all now seven years old, and you have been recognized as citizens of this town. Congratulations.”

Although the head priest seems quite old, he still has a powerful voice that reverberates through the temple. After opening with his congratulations, he then proceeds to start reading aloud from the book in his clear voice. It sounds like some sort of scriptures. I, with my entire heart seized firmly by the book, lean forward in anticipation.

The contents of the scriptures are similar to what Benno had told me a while ago, about the creation of the world and the changing of the seasons. The priest is reciting it in simpler words that are easy for children to understand.

“For a long, long time, so long that we can’t even imagine it, the god of darkness lived in total solitude.”

After that, he met the goddess of the sun, a bunch of things happened, they got married, had many children—among them, the goddess of water, the god of fire, the goddess of wind, and the god of earth—, and created the world we live in, or so the story goes. The “bunch of things happened” part seems like it was abbreviated for our sakes, but it sounds very soap-opera-like to me.

Myths are like that, though. All of the myths I know are all chaotic like that. Now’s not the time for snark.

Just hearing a new story is already fun, but comparing it to the other myths I already know while I only makes it even more interesting. Lutz, however, doesn’t seem to be interested, nor does he seem to know how this could possibly be fun. He rocks back and forth restlessly, looking enviously over at me.

“You look like you’re having fun,” he says.

“Yeah, tons,” I reply.

“What’s fun about it?”

“The beginning, the end, and all the bits in between!”

I answer him with an enormous smile. He looks at me, amazed, then sighs, shaking his head.

“...Alright. That’s good.”

“Yeah!”

After the creation myth came the story about the changing of the seasons. I’d already heard the basics of this from Benno: “Spring is the season of water, where the melting snow causes sprouts to grow. Summer is the season of fire, where the heat of the sun causes the leaves to unfurl. Fall is the season of wind, where the cooling air causes the fruits to ripen. Winter is the season of earth, when all life sleeps.” The actual myth itself, however, is different.

“The goddess of earth was the firstborn child of the goddess of the sun and the god of darkness. At that time, the god of life took one look at her and instantly fell in love and asked her father, the god of darkness, for her hand in marriage. The god of darkness thought that their marriage would bear many children and was pleased by this proposal, so he granted the god of life’s request at the two were married.”

So the myth of the season begins. Lutz, however, yawns, seeming to find this entire thing immensely tedious, so I think I’d rather explain it in digest form.

To put it simply, the god of life turned out to be more than a little bit crazy. He locked her in a prison of snow and ice and raped her until she got pregnant, and then even got jealous of the unborn children. Winter is the season of plunder and of nothing being born.

The goddess of the sun got worried that she hadn’t seen the goddess of earth ever since she got married, so she melted the ice. The crazy god was worn out after having been able to copulate as much as he wanted, so the water goddess washed all of the snow and ice away, freeing her friend and sister. Spring is the season where the two of them worked together to help seeds, the earth goddess’s children, sprout.

The god of fire then lent his power, making summer the season where the budding life grew to ripeness. However, after that, the crazy god regained his strength and started looking for the earth goddess. Fall is the season where the goddess of winds put all

her power into making sure the crazy god couldn't get anywhere near her sister, while helping to ensure that the harvest is finished.

Then, when the brothers and sisters were finally exhausted, it was the crazy god's turn. Once again, he locks up and rapes the earth goddess. Her siblings want to kill the crazy god even more, but if they do that, then no new life can ever be born, so they cannot. So, caught in this irreconcilable dilemma, the siblings are forced to wait through the winter, gathering their strength.

This back-and-forth forms the endless loop of the seasons, it seems. This is a myth that's as full of opportunities for snark as every other.

Incidentally, since the children here were born in the summer, our guardian deity is the zealous, hot-blooded god of the sun, and we have divine favor relating to guidance and rearing children. With that, the head priest concludes his talk of the gods and closes the book.

"Now then, I shall teach you how to worship the gods. If you offer your prayers and gratitude to the gods, then they will surely grant you greater divine favor."

He wears a very serious expression as he says this, slowly walking out from behind the altar. While he does this, gray-robed priests quickly unroll carpets in front of the blue-robed priests.

The head priest stands in the center of the room, with a line of ten blue-robed priests behind them.

"Now then, before you try it yourself, watch closely. ...We pray to the gods!"

As he says this, the head priest opens his arms out wide, raises his left knee high, and looks up towards the heavens.

"Snrk!"

I quickly clap a hand over my mouth, clamping down on my sudden outburst. It is absolutely not okay to spontaneously burst out laughing in the middle of a sacred temple. I am fully aware of this. However, no matter how much I may try to remind myself of this, I am filled with the undeniable urge to start laughing out loud. My stomach is seizing up.

I mean, that's the Gl■co pose⁴! They're doing the ■ico pose! With a straight face! Why Gli■?! You don't need to lift your leg like that, right?! You're an old man, you shouldn't be standing on one leg like that! It's dangerous!

I can keep myself from laughing too rudely here. This man is keeping himself perfectly balanced in such a crisp pose. I must just be fixating on the joke. I'm confident that no matter what else this man does, I'll be able to bear it.

The head priest slowly places his foot on the ground and lowers his arms, looking like he's doing *Tai Chi*. If that had been all, I would have been able to keep myself under control, but does this old man have some sort of grudge against my aching sides?

"We give thanks to the gods!"

With elegant movements, like flowing water, the head priest transitions from the Gl■co pose to the *dogeza*, getting on his hands and knees and pressing his forehead into the floor. Seeing this is too much to bear. A strange noise bursts out of my mouth.

"Beheh!"

"Maïne, what's wrong? Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm f... fine! ...I'm still fine. I can do this. This is just how people worship the gods around here, after all."

I clamp my mouth shut, burying my face in my knees. Lutz looks at me with concern. Even if I try to tell him that I'm finding these worship poses hilarious, even if I try to explain the joke, there's no way he'd understand. Nobody who didn't already know about the Gl■co pose would understand these waves of laughter.

This is their religion. This is *their religion*. They are doing this in earnest, laughing is *rude*.

I remember the image of opening the classroom door and walking in on a Muslim classmate praying to Allah, and I gradually manage to soothe my cramping stomach. To an outsider, a religions prayer practices can look strange. I'm only laughing because I wasn't expecting a Gl■co pose out of nowhere, that's all. Laughing is bad.

I take several long, slow breaths, then, when I'm confident that I can keep my face under control, raise my head. As I do that, the head priest encourages us all to stand.

“Now, then, please rise. Let us do this together.”

Together! Together, he says! Please, have mercy!

Everyone around me stands up. I do so as well, but I feel the corners of my mouth squirming and my stomach twitching, the harbingers of an enormous laughing fit. No matter how much I’m telling myself over and over that laughing is bad and that *laughing is bad*, the urge to laugh is only growing stronger.

“We pray to the gods!”

The head priest intones this, raising himself into the Gl■co pose. This is fine. This is the second time I’m seeing this, so this isn’t shocking. I have successfully weathered this crashing wave of laughter. This is a victory for my abdominal muscles.

In the next instant, the blue-robed priests, in perfect unison, lift their arms and legs.

“We pray to the gods!”

Seeing ten priests, standing in a row, with perfectly straight faces, doing the Gl■co pose is too much. My sides give out. The angle of their hands, the height of their legs, the seriousness of their faces are all perfectly identical. I can’t keep myself upright anymore. My legs give out and I crumple to the floor.

“Ngh! ...Mmph... nggeh...”

My stomach! Someone, save me!



Even though I'm still somehow able to keep my mouth shut, tears are welling up in my eyes, and snorts of laughter are still leaking out. If I could just roll around on the carpet, smacking the floor as I laugh my guts out, I know I'd get over this immediately, but being denied like this is only making my laughter stronger.

"Maïne, you really weren't okay after all!"

When I look up at Lutz, I see him looking down at me with concern as he holds the Gl■co pose, balancing unsteadily on one foot. He has delivered my finishing blow. I start smacking the carpet, unable to contain myself.

"I'm sor... geheh... I can't... breathe..."

"Maïne! Why didn't you say something earlier?!"

"Th... that's not it... I'm... heh... I'm fine..."

Lutz crouches down next to me, frantically waving his hand. A gray-robed priest rushes over, looking like he's seeing a disaster unfold.

"You two, what's wrong?"

"Umm, it looks like Maïne isn't feeling well, so she suddenly collapsed. She's already pretty weak and has a fragile constitution, so since she got too excited by the ceremony..."

Well, I certainly did get excited, but I'm not particularly feeling unwell. This is an ordinary laughing fit. There was no need to call over a priest.

"I'm... I'm fine! I'll be okay in a moment! Look!"

I frantically try to stand up, but unfortunately, whether it's because my body wasn't expecting such a sudden movement or because I'm oxygen-deprived after laughing so much, I completely fail to put any strength in my arms and fall flat on my face in front of Lutz and the priest.

"As *if* you're fine! What about this looks like you're fine!"

"Urgh, that was just a mistake... I'm really okay, you know?"

Saying that while I'm still collapsed on the floor can't possibly be convincing at all. Even if I'm fully aware that I'm fine, if I were to step back and look at me from the outside, it is only natural that people would have a lot more faith in what Lutz is saying

than what I am.

“I’ll bring you to the aid room,” says the priest, not believing me in the slightest. “You can rest there until the ceremony is over.” He picks me up, and I don’t have the strength within me to resist.



Due to my aching sides, I retire from the baptismal ceremony. It seems like this will become the kind of bitter memory I can tell absolutely nobody else about.

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

- 1. Content advisory: mention of serial abuse and rape by a domestic partner, in the context of a myth.*
- 2. Girl’s Day, or Hinamatsuri, is a Japanese festival in which dolls representing the Imperial family are displayed on a series of steps.*
- 3. In physical education classes in Japan, elementary-school children are taught to sit in a particular way on the ground, with their feet flat and their hands on their knees.*
- 4. Glico is a food company, known internationally for its confectioneries such as Pocky and Pretz. Since 1935, it has maintained an enormous billboard on the boardwalk in Dōtonbori, Osaka, featuring the image of a man triumphantly crossing the finish line of a race. This is a major tourist attraction.*

Chapter 67

Forbidden Paradise

The room the gray-robed priest brings me to is not the sort of room that would be used to give aid to poor people. No, this room is for lodging. On top of that, based on how clean it is and how much care has been put into the interior design, if I were to compare it to the waiting rooms at the gate then it would definitely remind me more of the room set aside for the rich, the merchants, and those bearing letters of referral from the nobility.

I wonder if it's because of this dress...

Based on how much cloth is used in a garment, and how lavishly and colorfully it's been embroidered, it's possible to roughly guess how much money its wearer's household makes. Compared to my normal clothing, today's dress is unusually fluffy and frilly. Its embroidery isn't just limited to the hems, and tiny lace flowers have been sewn onto it. It's extravagant. My hairpin is a custom design too, so at first glance, I think I probably look like I was rich enough to be on Freida's level.

But... I don't need to expressly point out that I'm actually from a poor family, do I? The priest is the one who arbitrarily decided this, and if he were to change his mind then I have no idea what kind of treatment I'd actually get. Aren't I always being told not to be so naïvely honest about everything?

"Pardon me."

As I frown, thinking to myself, the gray-robed priest gently sits me down on a couch. I feel like I'm about to fall over, so I reach for the armrest to steady myself. At about that time, the priest gently removes my hairpin and, with careful movements, removes my shoes as well.

Uh?!

I'm shocked by how spontaneously and naturally this treatment is coming. This reminds me of how in Freida's house Jutte was constantly stepping in to assist with

nearly everything. This gray-robed priest is clearly accustomed to taking care of people. My eyes grow wider and I completely forget to even try to politely decline as he stands up, gets a bed ready, and carries me like a princess over to it.

“...Ah, um, I’m really doing fine!”

“It isn’t good to lie before the gods. You’re in a temple, you know.”

It’s not a lie, though...

He lays me down on the bed, then politely covers me with the blanket. Then, he places my hairpin at the bedside, and arranges my shoes at the foot of the bed. Instead of a priest, this man seems to be an incredibly skilled personal attendant. This is making me more than a little uncomfortable.

“Rest here,” he says. “I’ll check in on you later.”

“...Okay.”

The priest leaves the room, closing the door behind him with a clack. It’s true that I can’t really move my body with any real power behind it, so I’ll wait here for now, recovering my strength.

My family will undoubtedly want to know why I collapsed, but I can’t actually tell them that it’s because I was laughing too hard. Lutz, who’d been so worried, would definitely get mad if he heard that, too. As soon as I think that, the image of Lutz doing the Gl■co flashes through my mind, and I snort with laughter.

I lay there idly for a while, and my strength comes back. I clench and unclench my fist to make sure of it.

Now then, what to do? I vaguely need to go powder my nose.¹

There’s a chamber pot right next to the bed, but since I don’t know where to get water, cleaning up my mess afterwards would be problematic. The kinds of people who usually stay here probably bring servants with them so they don’t have to deal with that themselves, but I don’t have anything like that. There’s also no way I can ask that priest, who I just met, to clean up after me. At the very least, I want to find someone to ask where I can get water, then find a way to sneakily take care of my own business.

I slowly pull myself upright, and experimentally wave my arms and legs. It looks like

I'm better to the point that I'm not going to suddenly pass out again. I use my hairpin, left at my bedside, to do up my hair. At Freida's house, there was a bell at the bedside to call for someone, but there isn't one here.

This is a state of emergency. Let's go search for someone.

I have no idea how long it will actually take to find someone, so I'd rather get started on this before things get really desperate. I climb down off of the bed, put on my shoes, and slip out of the room.

Even though the walls are occasionally decorated with pillars, carvings, and reliefs, the corridors that stretch on ahead of me are made primarily out of white stone. The clicking of my shoes against the stone echoes off of the smooth walls, but I can't hear anyone else's footsteps, nor do I see any other trace of human presence. For now, I'll start heading back towards the place where the baptismal ceremony was being held.

...Hm? Did I take a wrong turn somewhere?

Despite how white the temple is, I'm starting to see splashes of color here and there. The carvings and statues have gradually become more refined and elegant, to the point where I'm sure I'm not imagining how extravagant they've become. I think I've gotten myself close to where the nobility come and go.

The blood instantly drains from my face. If a noble spots me, I'll get interrogated, and things will get really, *really* difficult for me.

Not good. I need to turn around, right now!

I spin on my heels, then, almost trembling in fear, quickly walk back the way I came. I want to get out of the nobles' zone as fast as I can. To make sure I don't get lost on my way back, I try to find recognizable landmarks as I walk.

I've seen that carving before, right? And I remember that cloth there, too...

As I search for the turn that'll take me back to the lodging room, I hear the click of another person's footsteps drawing closer. If I had already managed to make it out of the noble's zone, I'd be whole-heartedly thrilled about this, but right now I don't want to be seen. I need to hide. If it's a priest, then that's probably fine, but I'm scared of it being a noble. I frantically look around, but there's nowhere I can hide in this hallway.

I stand out plainly, and am spotted right away.

“Who’s there?! What are you doing here?!”

The strict voice comes from a priestess, whose hair is done up very neatly. Her appearance is very neat and businesslike, but for some reason she also gives off the impression of being a sexy private secretary. The priestly robes she wears are the same gray color as those of the priest who had carried me in, although the design is different. Whether that’s because priests and priestesses dress differently or because there are special ceremonial robes, I don’t know. Come to think of it, there weren’t any priestesses at the ceremony, were there?

I breathe a sigh of relief that this woman isn’t a noble, then immediately start apologizing for stepping into the nobles’ zone.

“I’m very sorry, ma'am. My name is Maïne. I collapsed in the middle of the baptismal ceremony and was lent a room to rest in. I don’t have an attendant with me, and there was no bell to call for anyone, so I went to see if I could find someone. I unfortunately got lost, and when I noticed that, I’d found myself here...”

The woman stares at me, looking me over from head to toe, then sighs resignedly. She taps her cheek, inhaling a long, weary breath, but doesn’t take her eyes off me.

“I have business that I’m in the middle of, but afterwards I’ll show you to the hall of worship where the baptismal ceremony is being held. Do you mind waiting a little?”
“Yes, ma'am, thank you very much.”

The priestess, her eyes slightly narrowed, sets off, the clacking of her brisk footsteps echoing through the halls. I follow along at a half jog, trying to keep up. If we have too far to go, I’m probably going to pass out.

“Wait here, please. I need to finish my business here.”

However, thanks to the fact that this priestess only needed to go about another room down, I happily manage to not collapse along the way.

“Hah, haahhh...”

I nod, sucking in air as I try to catch my breath. The priestess looks down at me with a

slightly worried frown, then pushes the door open with a creak. I put my hand on the wall to steady myself, then look through the door into which the priestess had casually passed through. When I see what's inside, my breath stops entirely.

"...?! Is... that... a library?"

It's not a particularly large room, but the walls are lined with bookshelves. With a quick glance, what I can see on them are mostly stacks of papers and wooden boards, but there are shelves hidden behind closed, locked cabinet doors, and I can easily imagine that that's where the valuable books are kept.

In the center of the room sit two long desks facing each other, their surfaces tilted up at a diagonal as if to make reading easier. The length reminds me of the long, connected desks in university lecture halls. They look long enough that five people could sit side by side at them.

Also, attached to the desks at rough intervals are six thick, sturdy chains. The ends of each of these is fastened to six massive books, which are lined up on the desks.

"...It's a '*chained library*'..."

Visiting historical libraries in foreign countries had been one of my dreams when I was Urano. Sure, this is an alternate universe and not a foreign country, and this is a temple's library, but even still, can I count this as a dream come true? A foreign library, locked bookshelves, books chained to tables, books that you could feel the history of the library through, no matter which you read... this is something that I could have never practically managed to see back then.

The hand I put on my chest to calm myself down quivers. My heart is pounding like an alarm, and I can feel how powerfully the blood is rushing through my veins. The things I've wanted for so very, very long are miraculously right before my eyes... eyes from which hot tears of joy are falling, one after another.

"I've... I've never seen this before..."

This is my first chained library, but, more importantly, this is the first time since I came to this world that I've seen enough books in one place for a room to be properly called a library at all. It's not all that large of a room, but to me, having lived my life without having ever found a single book, this is a veritable treasury of happiness.

Perhaps this library is a paradise made by the gods themselves. My god is here for me!

“We pray to the gods! We give thanks to the gods!”

When in Rome, do as the Romans do. Deeply moved by finding this library, no, this *chained library*, I make the Gl■co pose, then drop into a *dogeza*, lifting my thanks to the heavens. I’m a little wobbly when I do it, but I hope that both my emotions and my gratitude were properly conveyed.

I quickly scrub my face and hands on my clothing, checking over and over to make sure they’re not the slightest bit dirty. After verifying that my hands are spotless, I turn to follow the priestess, and with a triumphant stride, step forth into this glorious paradise.

“Pardon my intrusMPH?!”

My face smacks into something, like I’d just walked into a sliding door that hadn’t yet opened. Since I’d slammed into it so forcefully, stars dance before my eyes.

“Owww...”

I sit there on the ground, rubbing my head with one hand. With my other hand, I reach out towards the door. After a certain point, I can’t move my hand any further. It seems that there really is some kind of invisible wall there. I try hitting it a couple of times, but there’s no sign of it opening.

“Huh? Wh... why?”

The priestess had walked in normally with no issue. I have no idea why only I would be rejected like this. The world before my eyes grows a little darker, and I start pounding on the invisible wall. It doesn’t budge an inch.

Paradise is before my very eyes, yet I cannot enter. I can see so many books right in front of me, yet I cannot touch them. Is it okay for such a cruel torture to exist? To come so far and then be denied? You asshole gods! Give me back my gratitude!

“Nooo, let me in!! Let me in tooo!”

Books are so valuable that, practically, only the nobility have access to them. The temple used a magical tool to quiet children down during the baptismal ceremony, so it's not unreasonable to think there's some gimmick protecting these precious books. I *know* that, but this is just too much. Caught in the grip of this despair at being able to see, but not enter this room, I collapse in an undignified heap, unable to even wipe away the tears spilling from my face.

"I just want to read..."

The priestess, finished with her business, exits the room carrying a bundle of papers that look like some sort of documents. She looks down on me as I sit on the floor, leaning against the invisible wall, and crying my eyes out, and takes a startled step back.

"What are... you doing...?"

"Waaaaaah!! Why, why can't I go in?"

I smash my fists weakly into the invisible wall, the priestess looks back behind her, into the library room. "Ah," she says.

"There's very valuable books in there, so only people authorized by the temple are able to enter."

Her words give me a sudden flash of hope. If only people authorized by the temple are able to enter, then I should get that authorization. The gods have not abandoned me yet. I quickly rub the tears and snot from my face, then shoot my hand straight up into the air.

"Question! How might I become authorized by the temple?"

"...The simplest way would be to become a sister-in-training, wouldn't it?"

It seems that apprentice priestesses are called sisters-in-training. In that case, since this woman is grown, she'd be referred to as a sister.

"Then, I'll become a sister-in-training! How do I do that?"

"You'd need to talk to the head priest or the temple master. Now then, let's go to the hall of worship."

She looks like she thinks the conversation's finished, but I shake my head vigorously.

“Where might the temple master be?”

“His part in the baptismal ceremony is over by now, so he’ll most likely be in his chambers, but... you want to go *now*?”

She’s quite clearly trying to push me away, but I’m not going to let this source of valuable information out of my grasp.

“Yes, ma'am! I can't go home until I do!”

“...Let's go ask the temple master, then.”

I don't know if it's because she understands my deep conviction or if it's because she's judging how to treat me based on my clothing, but she sighs resignedly, then brings me to the temple master's chambers.

It seems like I managed to get entirely lost inside the temple, because the temple master's chambers are very close by. I'm left outside a magnificent wooden door as the priestess gets permission to enter. Looking around, I see all sorts of expensive-looking ornaments and paintings. The higher-ups of this religion must be very rich.

“Father Bösewanz³, there's an applicant to become a sister-in-waiting here to see you...”

“An applicant?”

Through the crack left in the door, I hear the temple master and the priestess conversing. Tension wells up in me at the realization that this is about to be a job interview. Making sure I'm hidden behind the door, I quickly check to make sure my appearance is in order. The one spot on my dress that had gotten wet from tears and snot has dried, although it's a bit stiff.

“Yes, a girl who came here for today's baptismal ceremony.”

“Hmm, perhaps I should meet her.”

“Please go in,” says the priestess to me.

I try to enter the room quickly and professionally, but the door is far heavier than I thought it was going to be. With no other choice, I throw my weight behind it, pushing the door open with all my strength, and then slip through the gap as soon as it's big enough.

“Pardon my intrusion,” I say.

The temple master’s chambers very much resemble Freida’s room. In the center of the room, close to the door, there is something of a reception area, with a table and a few chairs in the center. On the very far wall of the room is a bed with a thick canopy, and in the opposite corner there’s a place for doing work. The workspace has a thick desk and two bookshelves. On a display shelf sit thirty-centimeter-tall statues of the gods, the scriptures I saw a little while ago during the ceremony, and candles, arranged symmetrically so that the scriptures are in the center.

The temple master and the priestess are at that work space, so I approach them, minding my posture. He’s fixing me with an almost painfully hard stare as I approach. I take a slow breath and ready all of my determination. This is a job interview. The job interview that will decide whether or not I can ever enter that library.

“Your name?”

“Maïne, sir,” I say. I clasp my hands in front of my chest. “If at all possible, I would like to become a sister-in-training here. I would very much appreciate your consideration.” The temple master gives me a slightly amused smile, then puts down his pen. “Well then, Maïne. Why don’t I start by asking you why you think you’d want to become a sister-in-training?”

“Because there’s a library here, sir.”

The temple master’s eyes widen slightly, perhaps because my answer was so completely unexpected.

“...The library? You can read?”

“Yes, sir, although there’s a lot of difficult words I still don’t know. If I can read a book, I’ll learn more words. That’s why, for as long as I live, I’d like to thoroughly read all of the books here.”

The temple master rubs at his forehead, sighing. His shoulders drop so much that it looks almost forced, and he shakes his head.

“I think you might be misunderstanding something. A temple is where one prays to the gods. The priests and priestesses here are servants of the gods.”

“Of course,” I reply. “I’m well aware of that. But, wasn’t that thick book of scriptures you read to us at today’s ceremony written about the gods? To me, those scriptures are as the gods themselves. I wish to read everything about the gods. I would like to

learn everything about the gods, sir.”
“Are you a scriptural fundamentalist?”

A sharp gleam enters the temple master’s eyes. I have no idea whether or not I should say yes or no to that question. It’s a little troubling, but I can’t imagine that that’s a phrase any of the other kids I attended the baptismal ceremony with would have known. Rather than risk saying anything unnecessary, I think it would be best if I just tell him that I don’t know.

“I’ve never heard those words before, so I don’t know what they mean, but there isn’t a shred of doubt in my heart: I want to read the scriptures and learn about the gods. Please, believe in the passion that the god of fire has blessed me with. I truly hope and pray that I can become a sister-in-training, read all of the books here, and learn about the gods. How can I convince you of this?”

He looks a little taken aback when I press him for an answer, but he looks me up and down, hums contemplatively to himself, and then nods.

“I’m already convinced of your passion. If that is indeed your wish, then you certainly should become a sister-in-training.”

“Really?!”

“However, if a child of a family such as yours wishes to join the church, they must make a donation that matches that level of passion. Do you know how much that is?”

It appears that, since my clothing implies I have a lot of money, this man is going to try to take advantage of me. “If you want to join, pay up,” he seems to be saying. I’m already fully aware that a religion such as this can’t be exclusively made of nice ideals. All he’s asking is that, if I want to join, how much money can I comfortably offer him in exchange?

Now that I think of it, I’ve heard that to buy a single book, you need to spend several small gold coins. If I were to gain access to that chained library, then I’d have access to at least ten of those bulky books. I don’t have any basis for this besides rental libraries in Japan, but in those libraries, you pay about as much as a book in order to be able to read all of the books in the library. Then, if you add to that all of the documents on the shelves as well as the ability to read as much as I want before I die, and then set aside the money I’ve been saving for my family... one large gold coin shouldn’t be a problem.

“I don’t know what the actual price of a donation is, but... if I think about the amount

of money I have available to me, I could spend up to one large gold coin.”

“L... large?!”, the temple master shouts, spittle flying from his mouth.

The priestess, as well, claps her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide. Judging by their reactions, I’m fairly confident that I presented them with an excessively huge sum of money.

“Huh? Is that too much? But, that’s just the absolute maximum, so I can pay less, you know?”

The temple master exchanges a look with the priestess, then clears his throat, as if to smooth over that outburst. He leans forward, looking at me seriously.

“Ahh... well, although I am overjoyed that a girl such as yourself burns with enough passion that she’d be willing to go that far to join our temple as a sister-in-training, by the time the baptismal ceremony comes around, you have already decided where you’d like to work, correct? Aren’t you already a member of something else?”

Of course, if I were to already have a place of employment picked out, suddenly becoming a sister-in-training wouldn’t be feasible. However, I’d been planning on working out of my home, so I don’t actually have a workplace to leave.

“I’m already provisionally registered with the merchants’ guild, but I don’t yet have a job. My body is very frail, so I was planning on working from home.”

“Working from home? A daughter of merchants? If you were to become a sister-in-training, you’d have to sever any links you have with other organizations. What would your parents say if you were to withdraw from the merchants’ guild and become a sister-in-training?”

“I’ll have to talk this over with my parents, but...”

I trail off. I can’t immediately answer about the merchants’ guild. I’m probably going to need to still be in it if I’m going to continue buying and selling things.

“I wonder if I can even withdraw from the merchants’ guild at all? What would happen to all of the money I’ve made so far, and all of the products I’m going to be developing in the future?”

As I wonder aloud, trying to gather my thoughts, the temple master, overhearing, widens his eyes a bit, looking like he has a question to ask.

“The money you’ve made? The products? Are you not just helping out with your parents’ work?”

“No, sir.”

This is my chance to show how uniquely appealing it would be for me to join the temple. Recalling the list of important things to cover in a job interview, I explain to him all of the things I’ve tried so hard to do, and all of the ways I’ve learned from my experiences. In brief.

“...Hm,” he says, “if you’re not registered with the guild so that you could help with your parents’ business, then perhaps instead of having you withdraw your registration, you could simply join us here. I might need to consult with the guild master, though.”

He smiles at me admiringly, as if that’s exactly the answer he needed to hear. If he could talk with the higher-ups in the merchants’ guild for me, that would be a huge lifesaver. I thank him politely, entrusting the negotiations with the guild master to him.

“First, I do need to consult my parents,” I say.

“Well, if your parents object or if there are any other issues, then please come talk with me right away. If what you’re after is reading books, then please, come here, to this room. You wouldn’t be able to enter the library, but I would be happy to let you read the scriptures I have here.”

“Really?! Thank you so much! Prayers to the gods!”

The instant I leap up into the Gl■co pose, I can feel my body start to lazily tilt to the side, and all the blood starts to drain from my face.

I overdid it again, didn’t I.

Since Lutz isn’t here, there’s nobody to stop me from getting overexcited or running around recklessly. It seems like I, having paid no attention at all to my own behavior, have pushed my body past its maximum limit, and it’s rebelling my cutting me off from all of my strength.

“...Oh, not again...”

With a thump, I fall to the ground and can’t get up. I’m very thankful that this time I’m

still conscious, even if I can't move my body. As I lay there, I focus all of my mental energy at the blob of devouring fever within me, even though there's not all that much of it at the moment.

"What's wrong?! What happened?!"

The temple master's eyes are wide with alarm as he watches me collapse and go still before his very eyes. He stands up with enough force to knock his chair back. The priestess, dumbfounded, stares at me, and then murmurs to herself in a quiet voice.

"...Now that I think of it," she says, tilting her head to the side, "didn't she say she'd collapsed in the middle of the baptismal ceremony?"

"What?" says the temple chief, looking up at her.

Stuck here on the ground, I apologize to the two of them.

"I'm sorry, but I got a little overexcited. I can't move at all right now, but please, just give me a minute."

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. The Japanese term originally used here is お花を摘みに行く, or "go pick some flowers". This is a feminine euphemism for using the restroom.
2. There's a bit of a distinction here that was lost in translation. The word 神官 ("shinkan") generally means "priest", but is generally gendered male. Until this point, Maïne has been referring to this priestess as a "female priest", but in this conversation the actual in-setting word used was revealed to be 巫女 ("miko"), which is most commonly translated as "shrine maiden", but can be used to represent priestesses as well.
3. The temple master is not explicitly named here in the original text, as it's common in Japanese to refer to your superiors purely by their title. This sounds extremely stiff in English, so here the priestess refers to him by his name and informal title. Maïne, a proper Japanese woman, will continue internally referring to people by their titles as long as the author deems necessary.

Chapter 68

Opposition and Persuasion

The temple master, having seen me collapse right in front of him, summons a gray-robed priest to carry me to the lodging room, and left a priestess to keep an eye on me so that I don't go wandering off again.

As a result, I wasn't able to sneak out to go use the restroom by myself, but had to rely on the priestess's help. Having to do my business while someone else watches is mortifying, and after being forced to ask the priestess for help cleaning up my waste I am so unbelievably embarrassed that I can't even look her in the eye any more. I want to pull the covers all the way over my head and writhe in utter shame, but I can't actually muster any strength to make my body do so.

While I lie limply on the bed, dejected about the things I can't do, the baptismal ceremony comes to an end, and Lutz comes in to check on me. When he sees how nice the room is, and notices that someone is here to keep an eye on me, his eyes go wide and he rushes up to my bedside.

"What did you do this time, Maïne?!"

"Ummm, I got lost looking for the restroom... and collapsed."

When I weakly lift my head from the pillow and give him very broad summary, he stares at me, unimpressed, then folds his arms and shakes his head.

"That can't be all, right? Tell me everything."

"Guh... Um, well, I found a library, and I got a little excited..."

Halfway through my sentence, Lutz squints, tilting his head.

"What's a 'library'?"

"An earthly paradise, crafted by the gods."

"Huh?"

"...A room with lots of books."

"Ahh... Well, whatever. I get the gist of it either way."

He rubs his forehead, waving dismissively. Since he cut off my story, I start getting ready to go home, reaching for the hairpin placed at my bedside.

“You’re leaving out something important, aren’t you? This little princess collapsed after she went to appeal to the temple master.”

As I wind my hair up, the priestess, who had been quietly listening to our conversation, interrupts, shocked, then shrugs.

“What were you thinking, you idiot?!” says Lutz.

“Sorry. I’m really thinking that I got a little too excited, though...”

Things would probably have gone better if I’d been a little more cool and collected, but it still turned out more-or-less all right. I accomplished my goal of laying the groundwork for becoming a priestess here, and the temple master will even let me go to his room to read the scriptures. I’m trying to properly reflect on my actions, but I don’t really have any regrets.

“We’re going home before you do anything *else*,” he says.

Lutz carries me on his back and, with the priestess’s guidance, leads us out of the temple. My father is nervously waiting for us in the plaza outside.

“...Looks like someone’s here for you,” says the priestess. “Well, this is as far as I go.”

“Thank you for all of the help,” I say.

And so, my father carries me on his back and takes me home. Along the way, Lutz gives my father a brief rundown of the day’s events. I leave it to him, as the swaying up here is lulling me to sleep.

“I’ve got to finish up my contract here at the shop,” says Lutz, “so I’ll head home after that.”

I snap back to my senses when I hear that, and see that we’re outside Benno’s shop. It’s clear that in my current condition I’m in no shape to visit Benno’s myself. Lutz is splitting off from us here, since he needs to deliver today’s report and to handle his apprenticeship contract.

Mark sees us from inside the shop and comes out to greet us. I wave at him from my spot on my father's back.

"Thanks for earlier, Mister Mark," I say. "I don't think I can visit today, but I'll come back later."

"Take care of yourself," he replies.

"Lutz, good luck with the contract," I say.

"Yeah! Go get some rest."

Lutz and Mark see us off with a wave, and my father and I head home together.



After a slightly extravagant celebratory dinner, as the family sits around drinking tea, I look at my father. I don't have much choice, I need to ask him about becoming a priestess.

"Hey, Daddy."

"What's up?"

He lifts his cup to his mouth and takes a sip.

"I want to go to the temple and become a sister-in-training, I think."

My father's smile vanishes in an instant.

In the next moment, he slams his cup down onto the table with an enormous bang. I flinch in sudden shock as the tea flies out of the cup, splashing all over the table.

"...Could you repeat that?" he says, in a low, threatening tone. "I must not have heard you correctly."

My eyes widen. The anger and disgust rolling off of him is so powerful that it sends shivers down my spine and makes my heart pound.

"...A priestess, at the temple."

"Don't be ridiculous! As if I'd ever let my daughter join the temple."

"D... Daddy. Why are you so angry?"

I have no idea what on earth could have made him so suddenly angry, so all I can do is stare in bewilderment. I'd thought that there would be *some* opposition, but I hadn't even considered that the topic would cause my father to have this kind of furious outburst.

"Apprenticing as a priest or priestess is something that orphans do! If you don't have parents and don't have a patron, then that's your last resort in order to survive. That's not for you, Maïne!"

"Only orphans... become priests?"

"Yeah, that's right," says my father, suddenly looking helpless. "You've got parents, so it's not a job for you. Don't ask me again!"

I'm dumbfounded by my father's reaction. Then, something clicks, and I realize what he's saying. I think I might have been misled a bit by how the temple master had said that he hadn't expected there to be any applicants to become apprentice priestesses from someone "with a family like yours".

"Gunther," says my mother, "Maïne didn't know, there's no need to get so upset with her."

"...Yeah, you're right."

My father takes a long slow breath, as if to let out his irritation, then rustles my hair. My mother starts wiping up the splash of tea from the table, tilting her head curiously.

"But, either way, why in the world did you suddenly decide that you wanted to be a priestess?"

I can see from how my parents are talking that we have a different view on how we think about priests and priestesses. If I had to describe how I thought about priests and priestesses, I'd say that I thought they'd generally be pretty respectable, so this is a little surprising.

"So, um, after I collapsed at the baptismal ceremony, I went to look for the restroom and got really lost."

"You were in the aid room, right? Isn't there one right when you exit?"

My father, who'd gotten a simplified rundown of events from Lutz, cocks his head in puzzlement. Certainly, there do tend to be restrooms very near large rooms that commoners use.

I shake my head. "...Since my dress was so nice, they mistook me for some kind of rich girl, so I got brought to a different room, like the one where merchants with letters of recommendation from nobles go. So, there wasn't one nearby..."

"Aah, of course, if it was that dress."

My father nods several times. My mother and Tuuli look pretty understanding as well.

"While I was looking, I kinda stumbled into a place that looked like it was used by the nobility..."

All the blood drains from my parents' faces. In a society that's as stratified as this one, we're actually completely segregated from the nobility. If I were to stagger around, lost, and get caught by a noble, there's a good chance that might be the end of my life right there.

"I was found by a priestess, so I didn't meet a noble, but there was a library! There were so many books there. I really, really wanted to read them, so bad I couldn't help it, but I couldn't go in..."

"Books?" says my father, his eyebrow twitching.

"When I asked if there was any way I could go in, she said that I could if I became a sister-in-training..."

"And then you just decided you'd become a priestess without thinking about it?" He sighs. "Give up on those books. Just keep making them like you've been doing so far."

"Huh?"

I stare blankly at him, unable to believe that I was just told to give up on books. He stares back at me, completely serious, without a single trace of a smile on his face.

"If you had to choose between cutting all ties with your family and going to live in an orphanage so you could be a priestess and read books, or staying here with us like you've always done, what would you pick?"

He asks me to choose between books and my family, and my head goes blank. I want to stay with my family until the very end, before the devouring rots me away. I've been thinking that while I do that I'd make a few books and read those until I was satisfied. Today, however, I found a library, and was overjoyed that I might be able to read books, and got very excited, but I hadn't even considered that I might get separated from my family.

“...Cutting ties... with my family?”

My shoulders shake, and my voice comes out weak and cracked. My father nods gravely.

“That’s right. Apprentice priestesses live in the temple. The work is hard, and the people you’d be working together with are all orphans. It’s not the kind of thing you could do since you have the devouring. You collapsed during the ceremony because you couldn’t manage your physical condition, so how do you expect to be able to work? Plus, books are extremely valuable. They’re rare enough that those people are protecting them using some sort of magical tool to make sure strangers can’t go into their library, right? Do you think that you’d be able to touch them as soon as you become an apprentice?”

Every single point he makes is a good one. I’ve got no room to refute any of it. The answer in my head is clear: becoming a priestess won’t work. However, I really don’t want to give up on all of those books that I’ve found. As I chew on my lip, feeling like I’m about to cry, Tuuli takes my hand. Her eyes are brimming with tears, and she squeezes my hand like she never wants to let go.

“You want to be a priestess? You promised me that you’d stay here with me, but you want to break your promise and go be a priestess?”

Tuuli’s words hit me like an arrow through my heart. Feeling like all the strength has left my body, I shake my head.

“...Nuh-uh. I was just trying to think of a way that I could read the books that were right in front of me. I didn’t *really* want to be a priestess at all.”

Apprenticing as a priestess is a means to an end, not the end itself. I don’t want to become one so badly that I’d make my entire family cry and leave them forever.

When I answer, Tuuli smiles brilliantly, but a sliver of anxiety still remains.

“I’m glad,” she says. “...You’ll stay here with me, right? Like we promised?”

“Yeah. ...When I’m feeling better, I’ll go see the temple master and tell him no.”

When he hears my answer, my father suddenly breathes a huge sigh of relief, like he’d

been holding his breath the entire time, and hugs me tightly.

“I’m so glad you understand. You’re my precious daughter. Don’t go off to the temple.”

While in my heart I really am happy that this ended without me making my family cry, the instant I close off my path towards that library, the devouring fever, of course, starts to spread through my body.

“Maïne, your temperature’s going up, isn’t it?” says my father.

“Didn’t you collapse several times today?” says my mother. “The stress of talking about this must have been the only thing keeping you going. Go rest already.”

I’m put to bed, and as I feel the devouring fever slowly spread through me, I gently close my eyes.

I didn’t think I’d ever not be able to chose books.

Until now, there hadn’t even been a “not books” option in me. Back in my Urano days, I probably would have immediately picked the books and leave my family behind. No matter what, books were foremost in my mind. Despite that, I’m *not* immediately choosing books. I’d been thinking that my family was the most important thing to me only in the absence of readily-available books, but at some point it looks like they’ve become just as important to me as books are.

But still, I finally found books, though. I really want to read them...

I’m not able to choose between my family and books, but there’s no way I can just abandon books entirely. In this kind of mental state, even though I’m trying to contain my fever like I usually do, I can’t really manage it as well as I usually do. It struggles with more force, as if sneering at me for being unable to cast off my lingering desires for that library. Irritated at how I can’t make this fever move, I start trying to come up with a way that I can find some compromise between books and my family.

Is there any way I can read those books without becoming a sister-in-training? Since the temple master’s attitude changed after we started talking about donations, perhaps I could try saving a bit more, then throw money at them until they let me in? I’m not really the kind of person who likes slapping people around with money to get my way, but desperate times call for desperate measures, do they not? For now, if I could only go to the temple master’s room and read the scriptures, that would be

satisfying enough, wouldn't it?

It ultimately takes me about two days to shut away the devouring fever. When my temperature finally goes back down and I can finally get up, my body is still sluggish. The devouring fever's receded, so if I spend another day resting I should be recovered after that, I think.

Lutz comes to check on me, and when he sees my face gives me a difficult expression.

"You're still not looking too good. Master Benno said that he wanted to talk with you, but it looks like you can't do that today."

"Lutz, do you have plans tomorrow? I want to go to the temple, and then after that go to Mister Benno's shop; can you come with me?"

When I ask my question, Lutz tilts his head slightly to the side.

"The temple? Sure, but what do you need there?"

"To read the scriptures. ...Also, to tell them that I don't want to be a sister-in-training."

"Huh?! An apprentice priestess? Where'd *that* come from?"

Come to think of it, although the priestess had said that I'd collapsed while making an appeal to the temple priestess, she hadn't said just what I was appealing to him for.

"I told you that I found a library during the baptismal ceremony, right? I was told that the only people who could go in were people connected to the temple, so I thought that I should get connected to the temple. I heard that being a sister-in-training was the simplest way to do that so I jumped straight to that."

"Isn't that more reckless than me wanting to be a trader? Look at reality for once. Aren't you the one who taught me not to leap straight ahead, but to look for a different path that's actually possible?"

Hearing those words coming from Lutz, who'd gone from a boy just dreaming about a better life to a boy with his feet firmly on the ground as he chases after that dream, is pretty painful.

"...I wasn't thinking about anything but the shortest route to reading those books."

"Man, you don't pay attention to anything else when books are involved. It's okay to just not go back to the temple at all, right? Jumping between hope and despair isn't good for your body. Doesn't that make your devouring fever start going crazy?"

“I was only able to get it under control this time by telling myself that I could at least go and read the scriptures,” I say.

He looks down at me, at a loss for words, then smiles wryly, patting me on the head.

“A compromise with yourself, huh? I didn’t think you’d ever back down when it came to books. Good job, that must have been hard. ...Well, if just going to the temple will make you feel better, then sure. I really think living there would be way too much for you.”

“Yeah, I know.”

The next day, I head with Lutz over to the temple. I put on my new, nicer clothing, since we’ll be going to Benno’s shop afterwards. Also, since the area around temple master’s chambers is particularly nice, I don’t think it would be proper for me to show up in my usual attire.

I tell the temple gatekeeper my name, and that I’d like to meet with the temple master. It seems like they had already been told about me, because a gray-robed priest appears, ready to show me around the temple.

“What will you do, Lutz? Even if you came with me, you wouldn’t have anything to do, right? Maybe you could go to Mister Benno’s shop and study? When I’m done with my business here, I can go to the shop too.”

“I’ll come pick you up at fifth bell, so wait here. Don’t go wandering off by yourself, okay?”

“Okay,” I reply.

The gray-robed priest guides me through the temple to the temple master’s chambers, but the temple master isn’t there. Instead, the head priest, dressed in blue robes, is there to greet me. He’s roughly the same age as my father, with pale blue hair that reaches down towards his shoulders. The temple master had been a dignified, slightly portly older man, but the head priest is fairly tall and slender. He looks like he’s used to practical work involving organizing people and running about.

“You must be Maïne?” he says. “My name is Ferdinand¹. Father Bösewanz told me about you. Please, come in.”

“Thank you very much,” I say.

“He’s asked me to read the scriptures to you until he comes back.”

It seems like the high priest is here to read aloud to me, but why would the *high priest himself* be here to entertain me? What did I do this time? ...Ah, the donation, huh?

Since I'm someone who can give them a lot of money, they're treating me with a lot of courtesy, I think. It seems like the amount of money I presented them with had a pretty significant impact. If that's the case, depending on how negotiations go, I might be able to open the way towards that library.

"Now then, please have a seat over there and listen."

We sit down at the table in the center of the room and he starts reading to me, but because I'm sitting across from him, all I can see is the book's cover. It seems like they won't let me touch the book. They're treating me with caution, not knowing what I might do or what I might be thinking.

"Um, Father. I don't want to just listen, I want to actually see the book."

"Why is that? Didn't you want to know the story of the gods?"

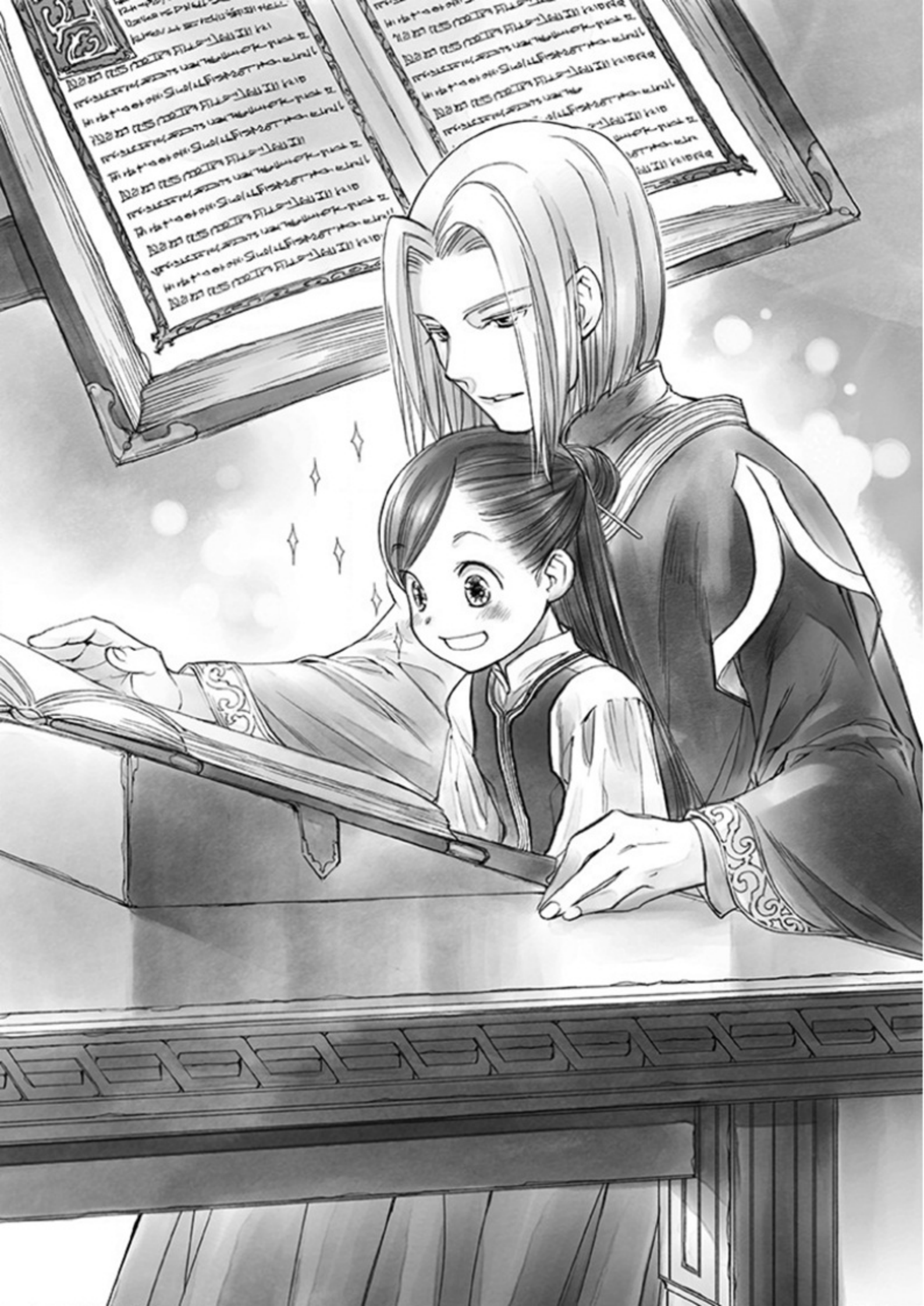
"I do, but I also want to learn new vocabulary words as well."

From his face, it looks like my words struck a weak point. He thinks for a minute, then nods deeply.

"...Ah, I see. However, these are our very precious scriptures. Can you promise me that you absolutely won't touch them?"

"I promise."

The high priest lifts me up on his lap so that I can see the scriptures, then starts reading aloud. The pages of the book are yellowed around the edges from where they've been touched, and are covered with absolutely beautifully-inked calligraphy. I inhale a deep lungful of the scent of old paper, then let out a slow, appreciative sigh.



It seems that the story we had been told during the baptismal ceremony really had been significantly rephrased in much simpler vocabulary. It has a very different sound to it now. As the high priest reads to me, I start learning new vocabulary words. It's fascinating to see all sorts of common nouns and verbs that I've been wondering how to spell for so long show up one right after another. I point out words that I recognize in the scriptures, careful not to touch the pages, and the high priest, looking amused, starts helping me with the rest.

"You're a very quick learner! If you're this good at absorbing knowledge, teaching you is very worthwhile. ...You aren't nobility, are you? Perhaps one of your parents might have some noble blood in them?"

"Not in the slightest, I don't think."

"Ah, a shame."

I have no idea why the high priest would think that's a shame. However, I get the feeling that the high priest might be like Mark, in charge of the education of the priests and priestesses. He seems very teacher-like, perhaps, and gives an impression that he's very accustomed to teaching things to other people, much like Mark.

"Ahh, you've come?" says the temple master as he enters the room. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting."

Now that the temple master has returned, the high priest tells me to return to my seat, and he carefully sets the book back on its shelf.

"Since Father Ferdinand was reading the scriptures to me," I reply, "it was a very fun and worthwhile use of my time. Thank you very much for your consideration."

With slow, easy movements, the temple master moves to sit down in the chair the high priest had been sitting in, while the high priest stands to one side.

"Well then, what did your parents say?"

"They told me that only orphans become priestesses, so they scolded me and told me no."

The high priest had been leaning towards me with anticipation gleaming in his eyes, but when I tell him this his shoulders droop dejectedly. He sighs, shaking his head. Next to him, the high priest opens his mouth to speak.

“It’s not entirely true that only orphans join the clergy. Noble children do so as well. It’s true that an orphan is very likely to become a priest or a priestess, but that’s because they can’t find another profession. The jobs that orphans can take are sharply limited, so they often have no choice but to become priests and priestesses.”

I blink a few times. “Why can’t they find another profession?”

“They don’t have anyone to refer them to one, and they don’t have anyone to look after them.”

I can clearly understand this. The system of employment in this town is highly dependent on having a relative or a friend who can refer you to an apprenticeship, so it would of course be extremely difficult for an orphan. It’s already hard for people to find jobs besides the ones their parents can refer them to, so I can’t even imagine how hard it must be for an orphan, who can’t even find any connections.

“So, I’d like to be clear, it is possible for you to become a priestess without being an orphan.”

“I understand. However, my parents also told me that if I was an apprentice here I’d have to live in the temple, and the difficult work I’d have to do here would be far too stressful for my weak body.”

“Do you mean that you weren’t simply feeling weak, but you are normally frail?”

The temple master frowns slightly, stroking his white mustache, and I realize that his face would make him look perfect in a Santa suit in the snow. I give him a big nod.

“That’s right. I have a disease called ‘the devouring’.”

“The devouring?!”

The slow, graceful temple master suddenly stands bolt upright, his eyes wide. The high priest, already standing, slams his hand into the table, leaning towards me excitedly.

“Did you say devouring?!”

“Y... yes. Is something wrong?”

The two of them have completely different expressions as they crowd their faces towards me, and I instinctively shrink back. I frown, wondering if I’ve somehow said something terrible, and the temple master slowly lifts a trembling finger towards the door.

“Father Ferdinand,” he says, “please bring the relic.”

“I know!”

The high priest nods slightly, then makes use of his long legs to briskly stride out of the room. He appeared so elegant at first glance, but he is amazingly quick. He seems in such a hurry that he leaves the door open behind him after he leaves. I stare at him, dumbfounded, as he leaves, but out of the corner of my eye, I see the temple master turn to the shelf the book of scriptures is resting on.

“We pray to the gods!”

He suddenly starts praying, rising into the Gl■co pose. Caught in his rhythm, I reflexively raise my hands as well.

“We give thanks to the gods!”

Flowing like water, he sinks down into a *dogeza*, and I stare, dumbfounded, at his back. I tremble in fear, wondering what the hell is going on. I’m convinced that something terrible is clearly happening. I really want to run far away from here, but judging from their threatening attitude a moment ago I can’t imagine they’d let me escape so easily.

Frozen stiff in my chair, I slowly look away from the temple master, who continues to pray. From outside the door, I hear very rapid footsteps quickly growing louder, and the high priest bursts back into the room, carrying something wrapped in a bundle of cloth. He unwraps the cloth, revealing the chalice I’d seen during the baptismal ceremony, and gently sets it down on the table.

“Please, touch this chalice.”

“Huh? It’s really okay for me to touch this?”

“Yes, quickly now!”

I timidly reach out for the chalice on the table. The two of them watch it closely, their eyes sparkling. The moment my fingertip reaches the chalice, it starts gleaming with dazzling light.

“Whoa?! What the heck?!”

I frantically yank my hand back, and the light gradually fades. As I look back and forth between my finger and the chalice, the temple master and head priest look at each other, then exchange nods.

“Maïne,” says the temple master, “I’d like to speak with your parents.”

Mother, Father, I’m sorry.

It seems something important just happened.

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. As with the temple master, I’m introducing this character’s name earlier than in the original text to make dialogue less stiff.

Chapter 69

Benno's Lecture

The temple master and the head priest look at me with gleaming eyes, and I falter. The head priest, perhaps noticing that my face has frozen up, goes to get the scriptures. While I wait for Lutz to come and pick me up, the head priest reads to me like before, letting me sit on his lap and teaching me various things. I'm happy about this, but there's a weird sort of tension in the air, and I very much would like to run as far away as possible.

Shortly after the fifth bell rings, a gray-robed priest enters the room. "A boy named Lutz is here for Maïne," he says. I breathe a sign of relief, having grown increasingly impatient as I waited for him.

"Lutz is here? I have to go, then. Father Bösewanz, Father Ferdinand, thank you for letting me come here today."

"Alright. Maïne, please, I'd like you to give this to your parents."

The temple master holds a written invitation. A written invitation from the temple master himself is nothing short of a summons that cannot be refuse. The day and time of the appointment is the day after tomorrow, at the third bell. I gulp, then take the thin wooden board from him.

"Luuutz! Thank you so much for coming for meee!"

"W... what?!"

The instant I see Lutz waiting for me outside the temple, I'm filled with an indescribable sense of relief. Swept up in my emotions, I leap at him, hugging him tightly to convey my heartfelt gratitude. He staggers a little bit, but manages to withstand it. As I press my head into his shoulder, Lutz sighs.

"Did you do something again?"

"...I think so, yeah. I have no idea what I did, but I think I blew myself up in the most spectacular way possible."

He pats me on the head, then grins at me.

“Master Benno’s waiting for you, with a smile that made it look like the veins on his forehead were going to explode.”

“Huh? ...Can I just go home? I’m already really tired.”

“He told me to bring you even if I had to drag you by the scruff of your neck. Your color’s still looking pretty good, you’ll be fine.”

“Aaaaaarghhh...”

Going to the temple had already frayed my nerves, yet now all of the warning flags that I’m going to be lectured by Benno have been raised. I trusted Lutz as my steadfast ally, but now I feel so betrayed.

Feeling like a calf being led back to its cage, I’m brought to Benno’s shop. As if he’d been laying in wait for me, I’m immediately brought back into his office. I’m told to sit in the same chair I usually do. Across from me sits Benno. Behind him stands Mark. Lutz, instead of sitting next to me, sits next to Benno.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Maïne.”

“...Y-yes.”

“Now then, I have a *mountain* of things I want to say to you...”

I brace myself. It seems like this is going to be a very long conversation. Benno takes a long, slow breath, then opens his mouth to speak.

“Before I get started, I have a message from Corinna. She said she’d like to see the dress and hairpin you wore to the baptismal ceremony. It was a very unique outfit. Very eye-catching! What were you thinking, wearing something like that?”

“It was a hand-me-down from Tuuli that we’d altered. There was no real meaning to it. I don’t particularly mind showing it to her, but I don’t know what my mother, who made it, would think of bringing it out. I would have to ask her.”

“I see,” he says, lightly. “Well, please do so.”

He folds his hands together on the table in front of him. He leans forward slightly, staring at me evenly.

“Well, how about you just tell me everything? I have to figure out just what to do with you after I hear about whatever happened at the temple.”

“Huh? Did Lutz not tell you?”

It's already been a few days since the baptismal ceremony. I thought he would have asked Lutz about it a long time ago, but it seems like he hasn't heard anything.

"Second-hand information always gets warped along the way. If I've got the chance to ask the actual primary source herself, why would I need to ask Lutz? Besides, there's always the possibility that there's some things you're still keeping hidden."

He looks at me like a wild animal looks at his prey, and my breath freezes in my throat. It seems like he's going to pursue me relentlessly.

"...Where should I start?"

"After you collapsed during the ceremony. Tell me everything that happened after you got separated from Lutz, and don't leave anything out."

I tell him about how I collapsed, got lost searching for a restroom, and blundered into the nobles' space. When I tell him about meeting the priestess and finding a library, his eyes widen in amazement.

"A library? I didn't think the temple had something like that..."

"You didn't know, Mister Benno?"

"Wandering aimlessly around in an area used by the nobility is the kind of extremely dangerous behavior that ordinary people usually don't do. Reflect on your own stupidity. What would you have done if you'd gotten yourself in actual danger?"

"Ngh..."

It's true, that wasn't somewhere that ordinary people would come and go from, so when I look at it from where Benno's standing I can see that he's right. Of course, getting lost is what caused me to find the library, so for me it was actually a really good thing.

"The priestess told me that only people connected to the temple were able to enter the library, so I thought that I should become a priestess as quickly as possible, so I went to the temple master immediately to appeal to him."

"Use your damned head! You thoughtless little girl!"

"Ow, dat hurds! Dat hurds!"

Benno leans forward and starts pulling on both of my cheeks. Both Mark and Lutz look like they think this is a completely reasonable response, and neither of them lift a

finger to help me. I rub my stinging face, and Benno, looking displeased, urges me on.

“And then? You got permission?”

“He told me that if I got my parents’ approval and gave him a donation, he’d let me become an apprentice priestess.”

“A donation? Did you do it?”

He frowns sharply, looking very stern. I can tell that he’s concerned that I thoughtlessly made a donation without having actually gotten permission first. To put him at ease, I puff up my chest proudly and give him my answer.

“No sir, not yet. Based on a rough estimate of the price of the books and the amount of money I presently have, I calculated a usage fee for the library. I told them that I could donate up to one large gold coin, but that’s it; I have yet to actually make the donation. I’m not the kind of idiot that would hand over my money without knowing for sure that I’d actually be able to join!”

I’d planned to put him at ease, but Benno, followed shortly by Mark and Lutz, gives me a pained look, as if he suddenly has a massive headache, then slumps his shoulders.

“I shouldn’t need to tell you that you’re a *colossal* idiot when it comes to money.”

“But thanks to that they treated me very well...”

“Well of course they did!”

I’d thought that it was a large sum, but it seems that the amount of money I’d presented is mind-bogglingly huge, even to a major merchant.

“Then, when I went home and talked with my parents, they said that being a priest or a priestess is a job for orphans, and got really mad and told me no.”

“Well, they’re right, aren’t they?”

“The head priest said that there were noble children there too, though.”

I tilt my head, not entirely understanding the reason why my father would have gotten so angry. Benno scratches roughly at his head, then explains to me some things about the clergy.

“You noticed that the clergy was wearing blue and gray robes, right?”

“I did.”

“The ones wearing blue robes are nobles, the ones wearing gray are orphans. The gray

priests and priestesses are effectively slaves working at the temple, making no wages, and serving as attendants and assistants to the blue ones.”

“Uh?!”

I’d been thinking that the color difference was due to apprenticeships or formalities. I hadn’t even considered that there would be this kind of distinction.

“If you, who are not a noble, joined the clergy, you’d be a gray-robed sister-in-training. Of course you’d be cut off from your parents.”

I gulp noisily. Now I know why my father had gotten so agitated. It’s not just that it’s obviously work that I am not at all capable of doing, so of course my doting father would be disgusted at the idea of my joining the temple.

“So, Lutz tells me that you went to the temple today to reject their offer, but did you really do it?”

“...Ummm, I mentioned that I had the devouring, and they brought out some sort of golden chalice that one of the stone statues in the hall of worship was holding, and then when I touched it it started glowing, and then they gave me a written invitation to take to my parents.”

Benno firmly massages his temples, breathing an enormous sigh.

“...Well, now they really will bring you in. You should be thrilled, you’ll live a long and happy life. That’s some great luck.”

“Ummm...?”

I tilt my head curiously when he tells me that getting brought in by the church is good luck. Benno broods over something, ignoring the fact that I don’t really understand what he means. He suddenly raises his head, looking straight at me with utter seriousness.

“Maïne, what would you say to signing a magical contract with me? Saying that the goods you produce will be sold through this shop.”

“...Why?”

The sudden appearance of terms like “contract magic” immediately puts me on guard. Benno strokes his chin, looking at me.

“If we let things go as they are, you’ll be captured by the nobility. If we want to put them in check, we’ll need contract magic to do that.”

“...When we did the contract magic before, were you maybe thinking that I was going to be captured by the nobility?”

“No, that was just insurance. I had no idea what kind of kids you were, so my first priority was to make sure I drew the boundaries as clearly as possible. ...However, I did think there was a chance you had the devouring, and if you were going to live for a long time you’d need to make a contract with a noble. I thought it might be useful leverage against whatever nobleman you contracted with.”

It seems that him making a magical contract with me and Lutz, who weren’t anywhere near his equals, was based on a hypothesis that the nobility might step in at some point.

“But I never made a contract with any nobles, though?”

“You haven’t made any *contact* with nobles until now, so you were able to make that decision yourself, but if you’re taken in by the temple then that’s all over. You need to start planning around being captured. I don’t think there’s a single noble alive that would pass up on the chance to take in a girl who invents things like you do and also has the devouring. Now, especially.”

“What do you mean by ‘now’?”

“This is news that I’m only just starting to hear recently, but...” he says, lowering his voice a little. “The lord of this town has been proclaiming neutrality in this, saying it doesn’t have anything to do with him, so there hasn’t been a lot of impact here, but it sounds like the bigger, more central territories are caught up in an enormous power struggle. There’s a huge political purge happening, so the ranks of the nobility are really starting to thin out, or so I hear.”

“Huh?”

The conversation got really dangerous all of a sudden. I try to pull out my knowledge of history, but I can’t really make any guesses as to what kind of era we’re in in the first place or how things might actually unfold. I’m caught in a maelstrom with neither any information nor ability to take a step back and look at things from above.

“Of course, in order to fill up the holes that these nobles are leaving behind, members of branch families are being sought out, heirs are being adopted, and marriages are being held to build new ties and interests. All sorts of people, money, and things are going into motion. So, since there aren’t that many people, all of the outcast nobility

that got sent off to be blue-robed priests and priestesses are being called back into noble society. Can you guess what's happening to the temple now?"

Benno stares at me, and I tilt my head to the side. I look over to Mark and Lutz for help, but Mark is simply smiling demurely, and Lutz looks just as confused as I am.

"Umm, so is there something bad about what would happen if there's no nobility in the temple? I don't really know how the temple is organized, or what kind of work they do. Wouldn't it be a good thing for the gray-robed priests if there's fewer people around to work them so hard?"

"First of all, there would be fewer donations. Also, if there's fewer people to use the orphans, then those orphans won't have any work, and it'll be difficult for them to even just keep living."

"That's really bad, isn't it?!" I blurt out, far louder than I was intending.

Benno sighs, shaking his head. "It gets worse. That chalice they had you touch? The priests call it a ritual object, but practically it's a magical tool. The blue-robed priests and priestesses pour their mana into it when they use it for their spring prayers, but that power's been dwindling. When that happens, the harvests don't produce as much food."

"Whaaat?!"

I had no idea that that chalice was connected to such an absurdly important thing. I'd been startled by how it had glowed, but I was just thinking that it was purely an expensive, decorative thing, meant to show off the temple's majesty. It's a necessary tool for ensuring the existence of a bountiful harvest. If the harvest shrinks, then the people who will be hit the hardest are going to be poor people like me and Lutz.

"Before the coup, there were plenty of noble children sitting around. To the magic-monopolizing nobility, kids with the devouring were nothing more than eyesores. However, with fewer nobles, it becomes harder to make use of magical tools, so now kids with the devouring are extremely important to the temple."

"Um, sorry, but, what does the devouring have to do with magic?"

Benno's jaw drops in sheer astonishment. He looks like he can't believe what I'm asking him.

"Did you... *seriously* not know? The devouring is what happens when built-up mana in the body starts acting violently."

"Whaaat?!"

“Focusing mana into a magical tool how you make yourself able to control your power again.”

“This is the first I’ve ever heard of it...”

It seems like I’m some sort of magical girl! Having tremendous magical powers is the kind of thing that reincarnation is supposed to get me, isn’t it? This is finally time for my grand reveal! I’ll blast away my enemies with my overflowing mana, and cast a tremendously flashy spell... wait, do I even *have* any enemies?

My thoughts drift off to a far away place thanks to this new information, but Benno bops me on the head, telling me to pay attention.

“It’s common for nobles with more powerful mana to be higher-ranked, and weaker mana to be lower-ranked. Plus, the poorer nobles don’t have enough money to get magical tools ready for all of their children. It’s not uncommon for a family to only keep the kids with the strongest magic around as their heirs, and send the rest of their kids off to the temple.”

In other words, right now, the blue-robed priests in the temple are nobles whose parents weren’t able to raise them and had cast them out. Everyone would be in trouble if they weren’t there, but still, that’s a sad way to live.

“Ultimately, until now, the temple had been performing their miracles by just throwing bodies at the problem, since the nobles there didn’t have a whole lot of mana. However, now that there’s less and less of them, the burden on each person is a lot higher. If they’re not careful, they might wind up in a state where they don’t have enough mana to make everything work. How many blue-robed priests were there at your ceremony?”

“Ten, I think.”

The memory of so many men proudly doing the Gl■co pose, destroying my sides, is still fresh in my mind.

“There’s usually twenty of them, but this time there were ten. Plus, since it’s the ones who have more mana that are getting called home, I bet you can guess how much mana the people who aren’t getting called back have. There’s no doubt about it: they’re so desperate that they’re practically begging on their hands and knees for someone with the devouring and lots of mana to show up. However, this is probably temporary. Keep in mind that there’s only a few years between this current thinning of the ranks and

when any new nobles born after this point come of age.”

“Yeah...”

If it's a short period of time, then perhaps I could bargain based on an offer to donate mana to the temple? I wonder how readily they'd accept a deal where I exchanged mana for access to the library...

As I hum to myself, deep in thought, Benno somehow manages to walk around behind me without me noticing, and he starts grinding his fist into my skull.

“Are you even listening to me?!”

“Ow ow ow!”

“You have mana, money, and inventions. Have a little bit of self-awareness! You'd be the tastiest snack for the nobility!”

I straighten up when I hear how serious his tone is. Benno sighs, withdrawing his fist, then shakes his hand.

“That's why I'm saying that making a contract *before* you get taken in by the nobility is the best thing to do for your sake.”

“...What would the contract be for?”

“Guaranteeing that the goods you make will be sold through Lutz.”

“Huh? What do we need that for?”

What this has to do with the devouring or the temple, I have no idea. I frown, wondering if he's trying to take advantage of my confusion to secure some profit for himself. Benno, however, sits back down across from me, and starts to explain his thinking for me.

“Right now, this is just insurance. You're careless, hasty, and thoughtless, and when that gets you caught up in some nobleman's plans and dragged to the other side of the castle walls, this contract will guarantee that we can still communicate with you. Think of the case where you're stuck in a contract with a nobleman, and we don't have anything like this in place. You already know that in order to go inside the castle walls you need permission, right?”

“I do,” I reply.

Thanks to my work at the gates, I know that you need special authorization to enter the castle walls. I nod, and Benno gives me a small, wry smile.

“The guild master’s granddaughter will still be able to meet with her family, even after she goes inside the castle walls, because they’re merchants who have been recognized by the nobility. What about *your* family, though?”

I can answer with nothing but silence. The entire reason I didn’t make a contract with a nobleman is because I wouldn’t be able to see my family again. There’s no way I can answer that out loud.

“I can’t think of a single way your family would be able to get inside the castle walls. However, at the very least, if we have the ability to make magical contract that not even the nobility can interfere with, then why not make a connection with Lutz before the temple or the nobility manage to take you away? If you do that, then I can use that contract as a pretext to take Lutz into the walls.”

My eyes open wide, and I look at Benno, then Lutz. When I make eye contact with them, they both nod at me.

“With Lutz as an intermediary, I can send you letters, verbal messages, or otherwise get in contact with you. You’ll be able to know how your family is doing. Best of all, I think, through Lutz’s information, your family won’t have to be so anxious about how you’re doing. Well, if you really wanted to make the contract with me instead, I don’t really care either way...”

“If I were to make it with you, I don’t think you’d really know much about how my family is doing, would you?”

I don’t want to imagine the possibility of being captured by the nobility, but, if that really did happen, then it wouldn’t be a bad thing for me to have already put things in place to be able to meet with Lutz. Freida had said something to that effect too, how even just being able to see her family was reassuring. However, is it really okay for me to be dragging Lutz into all of this?

“What do you think, Lutz?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I’d like to see the nobles’ quarter if I could, and I wouldn’t really mind being the person in charge of contacting you. I’d be worried if you were there all by yourself. I think I’d always have a headache, wondering what you’re getting yourself into.”

It seems like he’d already decided he wanted to do this. However, this is a contract

designed to keep the nobility in check. When I think of all of the extra burden Lutz would be put under if he was the other party in this contract, I can't just follow along with this so easily.

"Making a contract like this isn't something you should be doing so freely, is it? You might suffer, or experience some awful things, right? Plus, Mister Benno, aren't you not really making any profit all of this? If Lutz gets hired somewhere else, wouldn't that be it for you?"

When I taper my lips in dissatisfaction, Benno looks at me in amazement, sighs, and slowly shakes his head.

"You're not in such a carefree position that you can be worried about other peoples' safety. Lutz will profit from this, and that should be fine."

"How would Lutz be profiting off of this?"

"You don't need to think about that. Think about what *you* stand to gain. Honestly, now that you've been given a written invitation, you don't have very much time at all to get yourself ready."

Benno, who has much more information and a much broader view of things than I do, is plainly in much more of a hurry than I am. There's a lot of things that will need to be done before I get taken in by the temple.

"First, you'll need to establish the Maïne Workshop, register you with the merchant's guild as its proprietor, and secure a market for your goods. If they changed how they were treating you when money got involved, then when you negotiate with the temple you'll need to make sure you establish a way to make money. They're strapped for cash as well, it seems, so depending on how negotiations go you'll be able to work something out."

It's true, that's one of the benefits of having large amounts of money. Since their interactions with me got so much more polite as soon as I mentioned how much gold I could bring to bear, it would be best if I came to the table bringing money in order to protect myself. Also, even if I were to keep making things, if the temple takes all of it, then there won't be anything left for me to profit from. I need an outlet for my goods that I can trust. Even though Benno has been constantly testing me and I keep stumbling into his traps, he's still the most reliable partner that I have.

I nod, and he nods back.

"You'll need to be careful of the fact that a single commoner isn't worth much to a noble. If you can think of a path that will help you survive, secure it, and keep all of your routes of escape open. If you can think of any way to guarantee your life, any way at all, do it. Protect yourself."

"Yes, sir."

The head priest let me sit on his lap and read the scriptures to me and the temple master interacted with me so politely, so I can't help but think that the two of them are fundamentally good people, but there's no harm in making sure I've got guarantees and escape routes set up for myself. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, after all. I'm vexed, though; I don't have enough local common sense or information to know exactly how to prepare.

Benno watches me closely, then continues to speak.

"Right now there's ten nobles in the temple, aren't there? Don't just let yourself be exploited by them. Find someone among them that you can *use*. If you get snatched up by the nobility, you'll just be kept under their control until you die, so broaden your options, even just a little bit. Watch them carefully, then pick someone. *Think*. Don't just float along aimlessly. Struggle to survive."

"Mister Benno, why're you going so far for me...?"

These countermeasures that he's laying out for me aren't something that he could just spout off the top of his head without having carefully gathered information and given it a lot of thought. I can't understand why he would go to all this effort for someone like me, especially now that I'm not going to be an apprentice at his shop.

"If you keep living, you'll be making new products. If you're connected to this shop, I'll profit off of that. You'll be able to get information out of this too, which you'll turn into your own profit, won't you? Just shut up and listen."

Benno starts to sulk, but Mark, standing behind him, laughs quietly, wearing a wry smile.

"Master Benno is simply worried about you. You could get into trouble or cause unexpected things to happen at any time, really; watching you is very hard on one's heart."

"Shut *up*, Mark," growls Benno, looking at Mark over his shoulder.

Mark gives him a thin smile, then continues to speak. “The children who usually apprentice at this store are generally taught all of the fundamentals by their own families. Until now, there haven’t been any children that he’s needed to watch over so closely. He’s certainly not treating you like he would treat his own children, but he does worry about you with the same care that he would have for any of his relatives’ children. Of course, the same applies to me as well.”

“Thank you very much, Mister Mark,” I reply, deeply grateful.

“Just Mark?!”

When I convey my heartfelt gratitude, Benno interjects, sulking even harder. Mark and I exchange glances, and I can’t help but laugh.

“Of course I’m grateful to you too, Mister Benno! ...So, please, help me with the contract magic and registering my workshop with the guild.”

Chapter 70

Contract Magic and Workshop Registration

“The contract is ready, Master Benno.”

“Alright.”

Mark has finished the necessary arrangements for the contract magic. A piece of parchment, sized for a magical contract, has been spread out on the table, and set next to it is a special inkwell, the design of which I recognize from before. Benno dips his pen into the inkwell, then smoothly begins to write the contract. Just like I remember, the ink isn't black, but a vivid blue. When it's ready, I take a look over the finished contract.

The right of sale for all goods produced by Maïne's Workshop is exclusively granted to Lutz.

Establishing a proxy requires the acknowledgement of Maïne, Lutz, and Benno, and must be registered with the merchants' guild.

“What is this sentence for?” I ask, pointing at the contract.

Benno raises his eyebrows. “Insurance. If the contract's just between kids, then we'll see people who think that they can intimidate you two with violence or kidnapping in order to tear it up. Dragging me and the guild into it will give you a little bit more protection against that kind of fraud. When you make contracts like this, try to find a trustworthy ally that you can use as a third party on the contract. You should remember that.”

“...Thank you very much,” I reply.

He's already going to the trouble of setting up a magical contract. I didn't think he'd put himself in a position to get dragged into it too. I take the pen that Mark offers me, and sign my name at the bottom. Lutz signs his name next, followed by Benno, who seals his signature with his blood.

“Lutz, could you...?” I ask.

I squeeze my eyes tightly shut, and Lutz pricks my finger with his knife. As my bright

red blood starts spreading across my fingertip, I press it firmly on top of my signature. Just like before, the instant my blood touches the parchment, it's absorbed, and the blue ink of my signature turns black. Then, just like before, once everyone has signed and sealed the contract, the ink shines dazzlingly. The parchment seems to burn away, as if the ink had ignited it, and as the holes spread across the contract it disappears into nothingness.

As the glittering embers wink out, Benno lets out a long, slow sigh.

"For now, this gives us a good justification to make sure you two can meet, supposedly to sell goods, even if you get taken to the nobles' quarter. Maïne, now it's up to you to think of ways to make sure that *doesn't* happen."

"I'll do my best," I say, clenching my fist.

Despite my show of confidence, Benno, Lutz, and Mark all give me extremely concerned looks.

"Unfortunately, this'll only work on people who actually think your goods have value."

"Huh?"

"If you're up against someone who literally only cares about your mana, then they could just declare that you don't need to do any sort of buying or selling of goods at all. ...Luckily, I don't think any of the nobility around here are rich enough to be able to just ignore a large source of potential income that they don't even have to put any effort into. Also, this bears repeating: the magic of this contract only works within the walls of this town. Be careful."

"Yes, sir," I say.

After that, we write out copies of the contract on ordinary parchment. These will be used to notify the merchants' guild, and although they won't have any binding power over the nobility, if something were to happen in another town, these can be used to show that a contract already exists.

"Let's take care of the formalities today. We'll head to the merchants' guild now, to register Maïne's Workshop as a workshop and get you instated as its head. Once we do that, you won't have any troubles buying and selling goods. Also, if you demonstrate that you have alternatives besides going to the temple, as well as the ability to earn money on your own, you'll be able to be a little more stubborn when negotiating."

"Yes, sir," I say.

The merchants' guild is on my way home, so if I can drop by there and take care of all of these formalities, then that'll give me a little peace of mind. Benno tells Lutz to go get ready to leave immediately, and Lutz rushes upstairs to his storeroom to get changed.

I look up at Benno. "How do you make sure negotiations turn out well?" I ask.

"Good question. ...First, always keep in mind what the absolute best outcome you could imagine would be. Then, use that to figure out what you need your opponent to give you. In return, you need to understand what you have to offer, and then figure out what they need."

Listening to Benno, I try to imagine what I really want out of this. My goal is to be able to enter and browser the library. To make that happen, I'd like to join the temple, albeit not as a gray-robed priestess who would be expected to perform physical labor. What I can offer to them is mana and money and, if Benno's information is correct, mana and money is what they need.

We should be able to work something out, right?

"...Ah, that reminds me," I say, "the temple master said that it's not okay for someone to join the temple if they're already members of another guild. He said that he would talk with the guild master about that, but I wonder how that turned out? I wonder if I'll be able to register?"

When I suddenly recall what the temple master had told me, Benno sternly chops me on the head.

"Oi, Maïne. Stop passing off your work onto others. Actually put in the time to make sure you're securing your advantage. You have no idea what kind of ridiculous conditions might get put on you, do you?"

"You're right. To be honest, I hadn't thought that the chalice was a magical tool and that I might wind up being able to live a long life, so I was really just thinking that I had about a half of a year left. I see now that I was being careless."

Now that I've found a way to prolong my life, though, and since I've found a library, I'm significantly more determined than I was before.

"Don't let that determination go to waste. Use your head."

"I'll be careful."

Lutz runs back down the stairs. Based on how hard he's panting, he must really have been rushing. I look up at the seven story building and can't help but be impressed at his speed. If I were to run all the way up and down those stairs, I know I'd immediately collapse.

"Alright, let's go."

Benno grabs me by my sides and, as if this was his expectation all along, picks me up. Since Otto had told me that my walking speed was almost unbearably slow for a grown man to keep pace with, lately I've just been letting myself be carried without complaining at all. Resisting would be pointless; it would only just tire me out.

"If nobody at the temple is allowed to be in any guilds, then that means that you'll be the only person at the temple able to deal with the merchants' guild. If you can't push past their objections by saying you're already registered, then just dazzle them with money until they approve of your workshop."

Benno seems to want to waste no time whatsoever, so as we walk towards the merchants' guild he lays out countermeasures and negotiation strategies, one after another. I really want to be taking notes but, regrettably, I can't. I keep my eyes fixed on him, hoping to force as many brain cells as possible into operation to try to retain just a little more of this flood of information.

"I said this before, but there's a high probability that since there's fewer blue priests, there won't be as much work for the orphans to do, and there won't be as many donations coming in. Lay out all sorts of nice-sounding reasons, like, 'I want to help the orphans find a better path', or 'I want to give them work to do', or 'I want to make their lives better'. That'll help you get approval for your workshop. The temple should be well aware of the fact that no matter what they do, they'll need money to do it."

"Yes, sir," I say.

"Incidentally, make them guarantee that you'll have labor. Say things like 'I'll put them to work', or 'I won't have anyone to look after my health so I won't be able to do much on my own', or whatever. Come up with ten or twenty different ways to say that single fact. Keep in mind that Lutz is already working at my shop, you won't have him for half the week."

"Ahh, I see..."

He lays out individual, concrete, easy-to-understand plans. I nod along, sorting them

out in my head. Say pretty things to secure my ability to run a workshop, and exaggerate my weakness to secure a labor force. Certainly, even if I do have a workshop, I won't be able to do everything by myself.

"If people start understanding that these kids are able to put in honest work at a workshop despite being orphans, then there's a possibility that other workshops are going to be willing to take in orphans as well. If new products show up on the market, and people hear that those were made by orphans, then people might start to change their minds. That's entirely dependent on your own skill."

"Understood. I'll do my best."

I'm a little moved by how Benno seems to not just be thinking about me, but about the orphans as well. He sighs, though, shaking his head.

"Hah... there's got to be limits to how easily you get swept up in things, right? Don't just take on every problem you come across. Decide what your priorities are."

"Huh?"

I blink, surprised at how quickly Benno's opinion seemed to have changed, and he raises an eyebrow at me. It seems that this was some sort of test.

"Until you've determined what your own position in the temple is going to be, you need to put your own interests above those of the orphans. Rather, think of how you can use those orphans and make them into your supporters. This isn't particularly nice to say out loud, but there's a lot more people worried about what might happen to you than people caring about those orphans, after all."

"...I see."

As I nod in comprehension, we arrive at the merchants' guild. The door creaks as Lutz opens it for us, and Benno frowns a bit.

"If you're making something new, or if something's giving you trouble, or if you need something, come talk to me. It'll cost you, of course, but I'll do whatever I can to help."

"Thank you very much, Mister Benno. That means a lot to me."

Since it's almost evening, the second floor of the guildhall is nearly empty, and we're able to pass through it quickly to head up to the counter on the third floor. I return my temporary guild card, and hand over all of the forms that Benno had prepared before my baptism to complete processing. The paperwork is thoroughly filled out,

designating Benno's shop as the establishment I'll be trading with, and Lutz's name specified as the point of contact with whom I will be negotiating.

"Oh my, if it isn't Maïne! What might you be here for?"

Freida's light-pink pigtails sway as she descends the staircase, perhaps coming from the guild master's office. She notices me as I towards the bookshelf in the meeting area, then rushes over to see me.

"Since your baptismal ceremony is complete, I thought you might come here to handle your registration, but I haven't heard any news of you! I was worried that you might have collapsed in the middle of the ceremony."

"Heh heh, good guess. I really did collapse during the ceremony. I'm finally better now."

I chuckle, ashamedly, finding Freida's accurate prediction just a little bit funny. She shoots a glare at Lutz, who is looking at a map spread out on the table.

"Lutz was there with you, but you still collapsed?"

"Oh, it wasn't Lutz's fault at all. Really, it was my fault this time."

I first collapsed because I couldn't contain my laughter, and then collapsed again after getting far too excited over having found a library, so this was absolutely all my fault. I feel so bad about making her worry that I want to prostrate myself in apology.

"Hey, Maïne. They're calling for you," says Lutz.

It seems that while I was talking with Freida they finished getting my new guild card ready. Freida goes behind the counter to get back to work, and I approach the counter to get an explanation. They tell me that the information from my previous card has been transferred over to the new one, but I'll need a new blood seal on this one. Hearing this causes my breath to catch in my throat.

"Just do it, Maïne," says Lutz.

I surrender my hand to be pricked by the needle, and when the blood runs over my thumb I press it against the card. With a flash of light, registration is complete. It's a simple process, but a painful one. After I pay the registration fee of five small silver coins, the differences between my temporary card and my new workshop head's card are explained to me. Freida lurks close by, looking like she has some objection to make.

"Oh my, 'Maïne's Workshop'? You decided against joining Mister Benno's shop as an apprentice merchant, is it?"

"I gave up on that, since it looked like a physically demanding job."

"Ah, perhaps Maïne's Workshop could sell its goods wholesale to my shop, then?"

Freida immediately gets a sharp gleam in her eyes. Confronted by her suddenly merchant-like expression, I glance away a little.

"Ahhh, I'm sorry. Maïne's Workshop is going to be selling its goods through Lutz, to Mister Benno's shop."

"...Lutz again, I see."

She frowns in dissatisfaction, lips tapering to a point, but what's done is already done. I've already given her monopoly rights on pound cake, so I'd really like for her to give up on this.

"I already gave you pound cake, didn't I? How's that coming along? Does it look like you'll be able to sell it?"

"Yes, Ilse is in quite high spirits as she's been experimenting with flavors. It seems like she might want to hear your opinion on it before we put it up for sale. You absolutely must come taste it. How about tomorrow?"

I want to eat it, *but*. Sweet things are the perfect thing to eat when you're tired, *but*. Until my negotiations with the temple have concluded, I don't have the luxury of being able to head over to her place to sample her cake.

"I appreciate the invitation, but I already have plans for tomorrow."

"Then, the next day, perhaps? If she can, perhaps your sister would like to join us. If she comes along, then Lutz wouldn't need to come too, right?"

She tries to dazzle me with a mention of Tuuli so that she can get Lutz excluded. Lutz glares at her, making a face that looks like he's going to snap at her any minute. Come to think of it, she let Tuuli ride in the carriage last time, forcing us to leave Lutz behind, didn't she.

"Freida, don't say mean things like that. Wouldn't it wind up tasting better if everyone tried it? If Ilse is doing flavor research, then there's going to be several different things to try, you know?"

“That’s true, but...” she says, pouting in dissatisfaction.

I start to describe the details of how a taste-testing might work, hoping to switch Freida’s thoughts from her emotions to a more mercantile mindset.

“If you want to judge how close your product is to being ready to sell, as well as its potential sales, you should have as many people as you can taste it and get their feedback, I think. Kids and adults are going to want different kinds of flavors, and men and women are going to want different ones too.”

“...Many people? How should I be serving it? Even if I were to throw a tea party, inviting a lot of people would be quite difficult.”

Freida’s eyes are very merchant-like now. Unfortunately, even though all I had wanted to do was make sure Lutz could come as well, this seems to have turned into a tea party to which a lot of people might be invited. I want her to acknowledge Lutz’s invitation, so I keep piling on more suggestions.

“It doesn’t have to be a tea party, does it? You could have various flavors of pound cake cut into bite-sized pieces, and then have everyone try them and ask them which they thought was the best. It’s more like a food-sampling party, so Lutz could—”

“What a wonderful idea!”

Before I can finish my sentence, Freida claps her hands, her eyes shining. She looks excited, even positively merry. Her expression is full of joy and happiness, but I can pretty distinctly see that she’s barely even paying attention to me anymore.

“Huh? Freida?”

“When I’ve settled on a date and time for the sampling party, I’ll be sure to send you an invitation. Of course, Lutz, to you as well. Ah! I’m going to be so busy! Well, Maïne, Lutz, farewell for now.”

Freida, looking like she wants to immediately turn the ideas in her head into reality, turns around and runs back up the stairs. If I had to guess, she’s probably going to consult with the guild master. I honestly have no idea what she’s thinking or how wildly she’s going to be rampaging, but since her good mood made her feel like inviting Lutz along, I guess this was a success. I watch Freida as she leaves, thinking to myself how nice it will be to sample different kinds of cake after my negotiations are finished.

Lutz sighs. “The two of you are really alike, you know?”

Benno chuckles in agreement.



By the time we successfully get through all of the formalities of registration and leave the merchants' guild, it's almost dark, despite the long summer days. Even the central plaza, which had been bustling when we arrived, has emptied out considerably, with few people coming and going. As we walk home, I watch the long shadows that we cast before us. I feel Lutz squeeze my hand a little tighter than normal.

"What's wrong?" I say.

I stop walking and look up at him. When he looks back down at me, his face is twisted into a complicated expression, somewhere between being angry and being on the verge of tears. He grumbles quietly, almost to himself, the words falling into the shadows.

"...Maïne, are you really going to the temple?"

"Yeah, probably. If what Mister Benno says is true, then I don't think they'd let me get away. That's what he was predicting, right?"

His lips tighten for a moment, then he looks at me with unease.

"Can you really do those negotiations?"

The shadows grow darker as the sun continues to set. In the deepening gloom, I can see that he's even more uneasy, looking like he's about to cry. I can feel that he's been gradually squeezing my hand a little bit tighter, bit by bit. Hoping to ease his anxiety, even just a little bit, I smile brilliantly back at him.

"Well, I've never negotiated with a nobleman before, so I don't know how it's going to turn out. But, if that chalice really is a magical tool, then that'll help keep my devouring in check, so going to the temple will be good for me, I think, and I want to go there to read books, too! But, no matter how I think about it I can't see myself being a gray-robed priestess, so it'll really depend on how the negotiations go. I'm going to try my hardest to make sure I can make my living conditions better, if even a little bit."

"Yeah..."

For an instant, Lutz almost looks like he's in pain. He casts his eyes downward, and starts walking again. We continue on together, in silence, for a little while. Lutz lifts his head, pretending like he's paying attention to where the sound of wagon wheels is coming from, but he's making an expression like he's swallowing down something that he really wants to say. As we keep quietly walking forward, I grow more and more curious.

"Hey, Lutz. If you've got something to say, you can say it, you know? I'll listen."

Lutz stops walking. He opens his mouth a bit, changes his mind, and thinks about it a little while, then looks away, frowning.

"...I don't want to. It's pretty uncool."

"Alright, got it."

No matter how curious I am, it's probably best if I respect his boyish instincts to be cool. I nod, and we keep walking.

Again, we walk in silence. The sound of footsteps on cobblestone echo through the streets as people rush home, and from the various windows we pass I can hear the tumult of evening activities, but around just the two of us, everything seems so quiet. Perhaps the sun has finally set, or perhaps we've been swallowed up in the long shadows of the buildings, but our footsteps fall in darkness.

"...You said we were going to make paper together, and books too, and then sell them, though. You lied."

Lutz mutters this as a wagon rides past us, perhaps hoping that his voice would be lost in the clattering of the wheels, but I hear him perfectly. His words, which he had wanted to say as our circumstances were constantly changing but couldn't, strike home.

"I'm sorry, Lutz."

"It's not something you need to apologize for. I know I wasn't strong enough to do anything. What Master Benno said is right, so I want to work with you however I can to make sure you don't have to go through anything too dangerous."

He stops speaking, but I can hear him grinding his teeth.

“...But, it still hurts. You said we were going to start a bookstore together...”

“Yeah, you’re right. But, I’ve been thinking that since I want to read books, I have to make them. So even if I go to the temple, it’s not like I’m going to stop making books, you know? Rather, if I’m going to be living longer, that means I’m going to have to try harder, right? If I don’t get more books, I’m not actually fulfilling my dream, you know?”

Lutz raises his head. His face is still screwed up like he’s trying not to cry, but he tries to smile at me, shrugging his shoulders.

“Your dream of surrounding yourself with books and just spending all your time reading them?”

“Yeah, that one. You want to become a merchant, right? Become a merchant and get to go see all sorts of places, wasn’t it? I’ve got dreams, too.”

When I say that we should keep working hard towards our dreams, Lutz looks even more like he’s about to start crying. Even in the twilight, I can clearly see that the tears in his eyes are on the verge of overflowing.

“I want to help you with your dream. ...But, I’ve been trying so hard because you were there with me. I wanted us to work hard together at Master Benno’s shop. I wanted to do so many more things together with you.”

He hugs me tightly, burying his face in my shoulder. I can hear him desperately try to hold back his sobs.

“It’s okay,” I say. “We can still do that, even if I join the temple. I’m absolutely going to make books, after all.”

“No! That’s not it. I don’t want you to make them with someone else and just sell them with me, I want to make them together with you!”

Lutz had been keeping his unhappiness dammed up, but now that dam is bursting. He shakes his head like a child throwing a tantrum, and my own chest starts feeling tight as tears well up in my own eyes. I hug him too, patting him gently on the back.

“Nothing’s changed from before, you know? We decided already. Whatever I think up, you’ll make, right? When I’m going to make something, before I talk to Mister Benno, before I talk to *anyone*, I’m going to come talk to you first and ask if you want to help.”
“Even though I can’t do anything?”

He raises his head, looking surprised. I wipe some of the tears from his cheeks, giving him a small smile.

“If you can’t do anything, then where does that leave me? Is there actually anything I can do? Besides, I don’t know what to do, or what even *can* be done; there’s really nobody I can work with to figure out if I can actually make something except for you, right? If you weren’t here, I’d be in big trouble.”

“...That’s not right, though. I mean, people know that the things you make are valuable, so everyone’s going to want to help you.”

Lutz looks away, frowning disinterestedly, rubbing his face to hide his tears as if he was ashamed that he’d just been crying. Perhaps because getting all of those things off of his chest left him feeling refreshed, or perhaps because he’s trying to shake off his embarrassment, he rolls his shoulders and shakes out his arms.

“Nuh-uh,” I say, “even if someone else tried to make them, then things wouldn’t go so well, and I’d just wind up having to call for you anyway. So, I’m not just thinking that you’re going to be my middleman. Really, honestly, will you help me with my projects?”

When I shrug my shoulders, Lutz finally smiles. He grabs me tightly by the hand, and walks forward through the quickly darkening streets, a brilliant smile on his face.

“Everything’ll be just fine. I’ll make your stuff for you.”

Chapter 71

Countermeasure Meeting and the Temple

When I get home, my entire family is waiting for me, extremely worried looks on their faces. The instant I open the front door, Tuuli and my mother let out sighs of relief. My father looks relieved as well, for a moment, but then raises his voice angrily.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?! How worried did you want us to get?”
“Sorry for making you worry, Daddy.”

Since I had stayed out so late after listening to Benno telling me all those things about the temple, I fully recognize just how deeply worried my father must have been, so I immediately apologize. I take a sidelong glance at the dinner already sitting out on the table as I head towards the bedroom to put down my things. Now that I’ve gotten home, both my hunger and fatigue have suddenly caught up to me.

“I went to the temple, then I went to Mister Benno’s shop, and then I went to the merchants’ guild. That took so much time. I’m tired, and I’m *really* hungry, too.”

I wash my hands and slowly make my way to the table. My father narrows his eyes at me, eyebrows knitted tightly together.

“So just what happened, then?”

My father’s question seems to be the one on the entire family’s mind. Both my mother and Tuuli look at me uneasily.

“I’ll tell you everything, but can I eat first? I’m hungry, and it’s a long story.”
“...Alright.”

Everyone eats their dinner in gloomy silence, whether it’s because they’re caught up in brooding over things or just because they’re dissatisfied with having to wait until after dinner. I wrack my brains, looking for a cheerful topic of conversation, and suddenly find one. If I talk about Corinna, we’ll surely have at least a slightly more lively conversation.

“Hey, um, Mommy. Today, when I went to Mister Benno’s shop, he asked me to tell you something. He said that Miss Corinna wanted to see the dress I wore to the baptismal ceremony and my hairpin, too. Can I show them to her?”

My mother drops her soup spoon, and it clatters noisily as it hits her bowl. Her eyes go wide and she starts looking around the room frantically, her face turning bright red as she starts frantically shaking her head.

“W... what?! Th... that’s not something that I’d be fine showing Miss Corinna at all!”
“...Oh, okay. I’ll tell Mister Benno you said no, then.”

I thought that she might be a little bit hesitant, but I had no clue that she’d give such an adamant rejection. I feel bad for making my mother this flustered, so it’s probably best that we turn down the request.

Even though I thought I was being kind by saying that, it only served to make my mother even more flustered. She frantically waves her hands, her eyes darting around everywhere.

“N... no, wait, Maïne! We can’t just refuse. Hold on a bit. Aaargh, I can’t decide how to answer!”

My mother is in complete shambles. It seems like she’s happy that Corinna is praising her, but because she’s dealing with someone so spectacularly above her in society, she has no idea how to react. I smile a little, having figured out what she’s thinking. Seeing her like this, so far from her usual demeanor, is pretty funny, and also a little cute. I amuse myself watching her panic, muttering to herself as she flips back and forth between all her options while her dinner goes untouched before her. Tuuli, sitting next to me, pokes me in the arm.

“Hey, Maïne. Does that mean you’re going to bring it to her house?”
“Probably, yeah?”

Since my mother herself said that we can’t refuse, then it’s probably safe to assume that she’s decided that we’ll be showing Corinna my dress and hairpin. I don’t know if my mother would come along, or if it would just be me, but someone is going to have to bring them to her. There’s probably no way that she’d come here to see them.

Tuuli looks at me with wide eyes that glitter with radiant hope, hands clasped in front of her chest. I tilt my head curiously, wondering why she's deploying her strongest, most maximally cute begging style.

"What's up?"

"Can I come too, this time?"

Last time, when I delivered the rinsham to Corinna, the written invitation was addressed only to me. Tuuli, who had wanted to go, had to stay behind and keep an eye on the house. This time, though, we weren't sent an actual written invitation. So, when I go to Benno to deliver our reply, then maybe it would be okay if I ask if Tuuli could come along as well.

"Miss Corinna is really nice, so I don't think she'd say no if you came too, but... if I tell her in advance that you were the one who made the really big flower on my hairpin, then I think she'd say yes."

"You're the best, Maïne! I love you!"

The pure, innocent delight that shines from her face is *astoundingly* cute. As expected of our angel. To her, an apprentice seamstress, an established and charismatic seamstress like Corinna would obviously be someone to admire.

As I look at Tuuli, my heart warming, my mother suddenly holds out her hand.

"Hold on, you two. Please hold on. I haven't even decided if we're going yet..."

"Huh? But you said we weren't going to refuse, though?"

"Well, yes, but, see..."

The words falling out of my frantic mother's mouth seem to have lost all meaning.

"I think that Miss Corinna would have questions for the person who actually sewed the dress," I say, "but... if you really don't want to go, then you don't have to, you know?"

When I imply that only Tuuli and I would be going, my mother immediately shakes her head.

"When did I say that I didn't want to go?"

"Okay!" I say, smiling widely. "Then I'll tell Mister Benno that all three of us will come."

My mother is at a loss for words. Tuuli looks at her and giggles. I can't help but start giggling too. My mother sighs resignedly, then laughs as well. My father, watching the three of us, smiles, but it's a complicated smile, like he's not laughing along.

"Now then," says my mother, once dinner has been cleaned up and tea has been served, "I think you had some things you were going to tell us."

In an instant, the cheerful mood vanishes and the room grows heavy. Everyone looks at me, urging me to start talking.

"Ummm, let's start from what happened at the temple. I told them that I wasn't going to be a priestess, but then when they found out that I had the devouring, they said they wanted to speak to my parents and gave me this invitation. It's for the day after tomorrow, on the third bell."

When my father looks at the wooden slip I pull from my bag, his face goes completely white. Since he works as a gatekeeper, he probably has seen countless written invitations like this before, and probably knows all too well what kind of meaning a written invitation from the temple master, a noble, carries.

He stares at the official order of summons, his lips tight. "Maïne, what did you *do*?!"

"I didn't really *do* anything. All I did was talk, and they read the scriptures to me—"

"You had a nobleman *read* to you? You—"

"—I mean," I say, pouting, "I didn't know that the head priest was a noble!"

When I go on to explain how I made the chalice shine, I can see in both of my parents' faces that all life has left their bodies. It seems like this is far more than they can bear. I wave my hands in front of their empty eyes, tilting my head curiously.

"Can I keep going?"

My father comes back to his senses with a start. He shakes his head vigorously, as if to clear it.

"Yeah, keep going," he says, scratching his head.

"After I went to the temple, I went to Mister Benno's shop. Mister Benno knows a lot more about the devouring than me, and also knows a lot about the temple and the nobles, so he taught me a lot of things."

"What kind of things?"

I glance around the table and see everyone looking at me suspiciously. I nod, and take a long, slow breath, in and out.

“So, um, he said that the fever is caused by mana. And that means that I’m not going to be able to get away from the temple or from the nobles.”

“That’s...”

My mother and Tuuli clap their hands over their mouths, quivering in terror. I don’t know if they’re scared because it turns out I have magic, or if it’s because of the authority of the temple, but either way, I avert my eyes and continue.

“But, if there’s magical tools at the temple, then if I go there I can live longer.”

My father, my mother, and Tuuli all look at me with a mix of hope and fear. When I see them looking at me with worried eyes, not with fear over my having mana, all of the built-up tension leaves my body.

“Hey, Maïne,” says Tuuli. “If you go to the temple, then even if you live a lot longer, we won’t be able to see you, right?”

“At this rate, yeah...”

Tuuli’s eyes start filling with tears as she shakes her head desperately.

“What’s different from you being locked up by a nobleman, then?” says my father, sounding like he’s choking the words out. “I don’t want to send you to the temple.”

It’s true, if things keep going along the same path that they have been, then there’s no reasonable outcome besides me being taken in as a gray-robed sister-in-training in exchange for my mana and my donation. It’s an outcome that is nothing but good for the temple.

“Hey, Daddy. Do you know what’s happening in the other parts of the country? Did you hear about the coup, and how all the nobles are being shuffled around differently?”

“There was a merchant saying something like that a few days ago. I’m a gatekeeper, so I hear about sorts of things, but... that doesn’t have anything to do with this, right?”

As I wonder if Benno might have heard about this through Otto, I shake my head.

“That’s why I’m being told to go to the temple. There’s not as many nobles around right now, and the temple needs mana in order to do their jobs. I don’t really know if what Mister Benno said is true or not, but you would, wouldn’t you?”

My father’s breath catches in his throat, like he’d just remembered something. He strokes his chin, eyes cast down, thinking about something.

“The nobles are definitely scattering to other places, hm. I’ve been seeing nobles leave, but lately, I haven’t been seeing any come back.”

“So Mister Benno was right about that?” I mutter to myself. “Okay, then in that case, I think we can make this work.”

“What do you mean?” asks my mother. The entire family leans forward expectantly.

“Mister Benno said that I was lucky. The temple is in trouble because it doesn’t have many nobles left, so he said that I might be able to negotiate things so that I can get treated more like a noble.”

“Tell me everything,” says my father. He has the serious, fierce look in his eyes that I’ve seen when he’s at work.

I spell out everything that Benno told me in the finest detail that I can, in a way to make it easy to understand. I also tell them about the magical contract and the fact that my workshop has now been registered.

“...So, although I don’t know if it’ll work until we try it, Mister Benno thinks that we might be able to play up how weak I am and get them to both treat me well and let me come and go as I want. He says that with the way things are for them right now, we should be able to get those kinds of concessions out of them. He told me that I need to struggle for my life.”

My father’s eyes gleam. “Struggle for your life, huh? Now’s a great time to think like that, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Emphasizing both my ability to provide them with magical power and my weakness, get them to treat me more like a noble.

Emphasizing both my weakness and my love for my parents, get them to allow me to come and go.

Emphasizing my ability to bring in money, get them to allow me to continue operating my workshop.

“I’ve got other, more selfish goals, like being able to browse the library and avoid having to do any heavy labor, but even if we can only get those three down then I’d call that a win, I think.”

“Got it. Let’s give that a shot. I became a soldier to protect all of the families in this town. If I can’t protect my own family, then what am I protecting? I’m going to do my absolute best to make sure you get to live.”

His eyes burning with passion, my father gives me a confident grin, wearing the expression of a man with a hard battle before him.



The next day, both of my parents go to their workplaces to ask for the day off. After how much I did the day before, it’s only natural that I could barely move, so I took the day to rest.

The day after that is the day that we are to be summoned by the temple. My parents put on their only nice set of clothes, I put on the apprentice’s clothing that I have been using to go to Benno’s shop, and the three of us head towards the temple.

“Keep me safe,” I tell my father.

Like I’d seen the soldiers do at the gate, I make a fist, then bend my elbow as if flexing my bicep. My father looks down at me in amazement, watching me do what the soldiers do when they wish each other a victorious battle, then smirks. He makes a fist and bends his elbow as well, then strikes my fist with his own.

“Leave it to me,” he says.

It seems that people at the temple gates have already been told to expect us, because gray-robed priests are already there to guide us through the temple, leading us to the temple master’s room. We cut through the worship hall and through the part of the temples where commoners would be lodged, straight towards the area used by the nobility.

The corridors around us gradually grow more grand as we pass through them. My father is full of determination, his temples quivering and his fists tightly clenched. My mother, looking nervously at my father’s expression, is pale with tension. I glance at

the hand she's holding mine with, and see that all the muscles on it are standing out, quivering.

"Father Bösewanz," says the gray-robed priest, "the girl Maïne and her parents have come to see you."

The priest opens the door for us. Inside, the temple master and head priest are seated at the table, waiting for us. In addition, behind the table are four gray-robed priests, standing in a line.

I hadn't known that they were orphans the other day, but even when I look at them knowing that now, they're still so well-groomed that I wouldn't be able to tell. I wonder if the treatment they get here isn't actually all that bad? Either that or people serving as the attendants of nobles are required to have a neat personal appearance.

"Good morning, Father," I say to the temple master.
"Ah, Maïne," he greets me.

Just as I remembered, he looks like a kindly old man when he greets me. However, when he looks at my parents, his eyes widen. He looks at them in disbelief, fists trembling.

"And these are... your parents, if I'm not mistaken?" he says.
"Yes, that's correct."
"And what might their occupations be?"
"My father is a soldier, and my mother is a dyer."

When I give him my answer, he looks them over, scrutinizing them so closely that it's rather impolite. Then, he snorts dismissively, looking down his nose at them. Even though he hasn't said anything, I can immediately tell that he's looking down on them, thinking of them as mere commoners.

I blink, shocked by how quickly his demeanor changed.

There is not a trace of the kindly old man I saw a moment ago in this man's expression as he suddenly starts sneering at us. I am suddenly faced with the reality of how wide the gulf is between our social status, and understand entirely that the entire reason he had been so kindly towards me was because of my money.

“Alright, well, let’s get this over with quickly.”

Without offering a greeting, without beckoning us to the table, while we are still standing just inside the room, he moves straight into the order of business. I wonder if this might be an ordinary sort of thing, but when I compare this sort of behavior to the kind temple master I’d known so far, I can’t help but frown.

The head priest, sitting next to the temple master, is keeping his face neutral, so I can’t see any of the same sort of disdain in his eyes. However, he doesn’t seem inclined to stop the temple master, merely content to watch, expressionless. The temple master clears his throat, raising his eyebrows in a very self-important manner as he opens his mouth to speak.

“I know Maïne had some interest in becoming a sister-in-training, but it seems like you have some sort of objections.”

“That’s correct, sir,” says my father. “I don’t have any intention to put my beloved daughter in the same conditions as orphans.”

My father is quietly returning the temple master’s dismissive stare with an intensity like sparks flying, but the temple master doesn’t seem to take any notice, ignoring my father’s attitude as he idly strokes his beard.

“Hmph. That might be the case, but Maïne has the devouring. That means that if she doesn’t get magical tools, she won’t live much longer. There’s magical tools here at the temple. If you have any compassion, you’ll let her join the temple.”

This is clearly an order, with no room for negotiation. His snide tone and his rude demeanor are very oppressive and I, unused to this sort of social stratification, can’t help but get irritated. I can tell that I’m not the only one getting irritated at how clearly we’re being looked down on, because my father twitches a little before he replies.

“I must refuse. I will not let Maïne live in the same conditions as orphans.”

“That’s correct,” adds my mother. “Even if she didn’t have the devouring, she’s still very frail. She collapsed twice during the baptismal ceremony, and after that was laid out with a fever for several days. She can’t survive here in the temple.”

My mother’s hands are tense as she replies, ready to protect me. Refusing something a command like this despite the tremendous difference in social stature is basically putting their very lives on the line. Naturally, the temple master hadn’t expected to be

so openly refused, let alone by both parents. He grows bright red with rage, all the way to the top of his balding head.

“How impertinent! Be obedient and hand over your daughter!”

This man is acting so indecently that I can’t even imagine that he could be a clergyman in any sort of church at all. My breath catches in my throat. I know that what we commoners are *supposed* to do when facing a nobleman like this is obediently bow our heads, but I really don’t want to acknowledge it. My father seems to be trembling in anger, but not a trace of it shows in his voice as he calmly refuses a second time.

“I must refuse. There are many orphans here at the temple. They are worked hard, used as playthings, and ultimately discarded. I absolutely will not allow my daughter to be thrown into the midst of that.”

When my father says that, my mother grips my hand painfully hard, nodding firmly. I’m so happy and proud of them that I can’t help but smile, but it looks like these words have only thrown oil onto the temple master’s fire.

“You dare!” he yells. He looks over his shoulder at the gray-robed priests standing behind him. “Seize these impertinent parents, and lock up the girl!”

I don’t know if he’s being too hasty or if he isn’t even thinking about this conversation anymore, but after having suddenly escalated the situation he stands up, quickly enough that his chair falls behind him.

“Stand back,” says my father.

He steps in front of me and my mother as the gray-robed priests come toward us. Thanks to the table between them and us, they can’t charge us all at once, so they come at us seconds apart from each other.

The temple master looks at my father as he quickly adopts a fighting stance, and gives him an irritated smirk. “If you dare to strike a priest, then you shall be executed in the name of the gods!”

“If it’s what I have to do to protect Maïne, then I’m ready to face the consequences.”

He launches his fist directly into the stomach of the first priest to reach him, then when the priest starts to double over in pain, brings his knee up hard, directly into the man’s

jaw, knocking him immediately unconscious. The second priest tries to get behind him, but he swings around, catching the man in the temple with the back of his fist before launching another kick.

With strike after strike, he unhesitatingly went for their vitals, the clearly incompetent priests no match for his fluid, trained motions. There is no way that these priests, who spend most of their time taking care of nobles, could possibly be any match for my father, who has practiced fighting for countless hours as a soldier. The remaining two priests, perhaps unused to this kind of violence, look terrified of my father, inching backwards away from him.

“Hmph, you can fight one or two people, but how many can you really hold out against?”

The temple master sneers at my fathers resolve, throwing open the door to the room. I don’t know how he managed to summon them, but on the other side of the door are at least ten more priests, and all of them immediately rush into the room. When I see how victorious the temple master looks, something inside of me snaps.

That is *enough!*

My entire body flushes with heat, like my blood is suddenly boiling. Despite that, my mind remains clear, a strange serenity wrapping my thoughts. My anger has flooded every cell of my body.

“‘You dare’, hm? That’s my line. Do not touch my parents.”

When I take a step forward, the smugly-smiling temple master, the head priest who had been quietly observing this entire time, the priests pouring into the room... all of them, for some reason, turn to me in sudden fright.

Chapter 72

Settlement

Although my body seethes with a boiling fever, my head is cool and clear. I feel like my body is lighter than ever. When I stare directly at the temple master, haughtily standing by the door, I can clearly see all the blood drain from his face, turning him ghastly pale.

Well, if you get like this just from being stared at, maybe you shouldn't have threatened me with such horrible things, hm? Idiot.

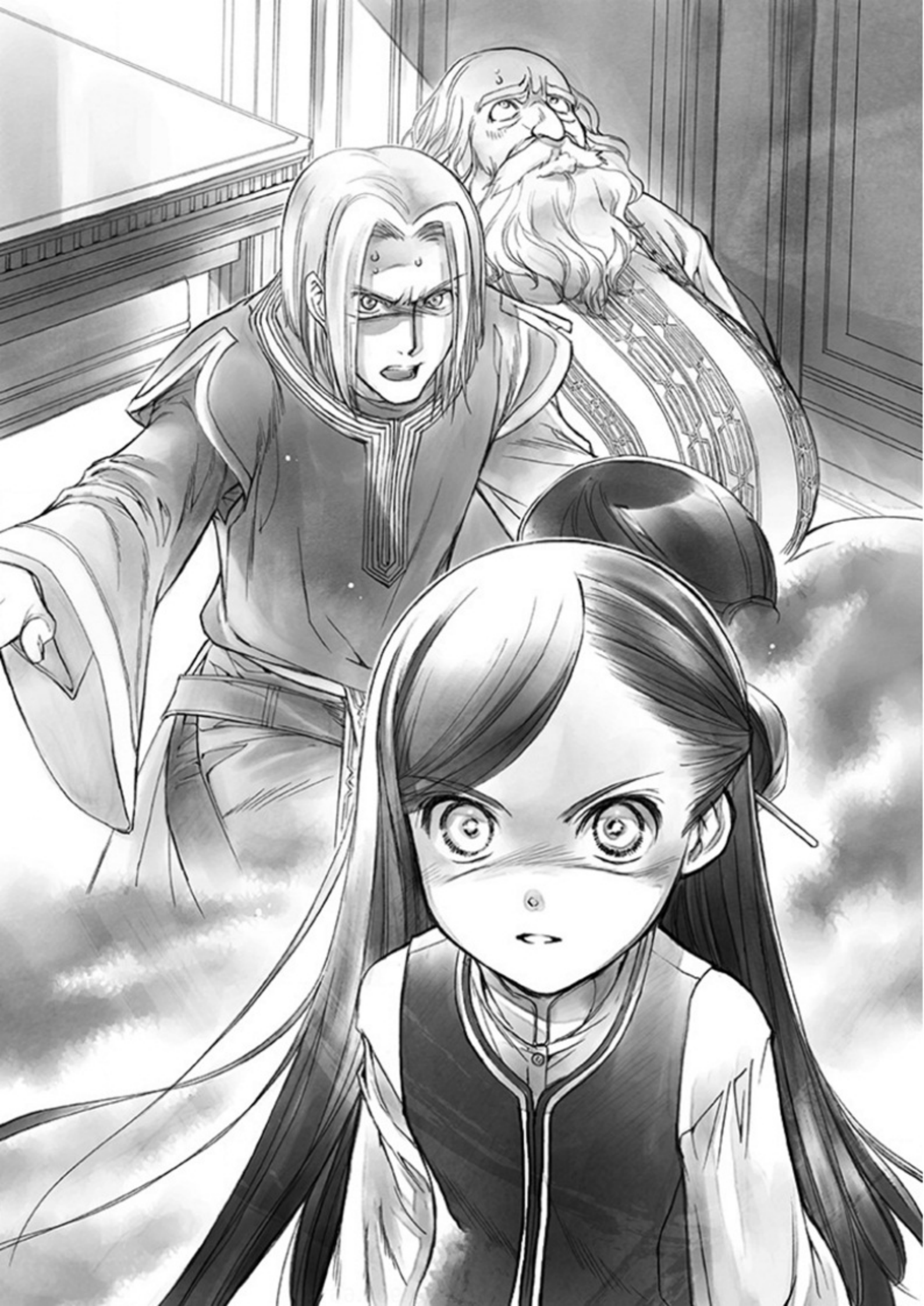
"Maïne, your mana is leaking out. Control your emotions!"

The head priest, perhaps having seen the temple master quickly lose all color, stands up with a sudden clatter, face tight as he calls to me. I, hearing an unexpected voice from an unexpected direction, turn my gaze from the temple master towards the head priest. The instant the temple master leaves my field of vision, the sound of him collapsing heavily to the floor reaches my ears.

It seems like now that I've looked away, the gray-robed priests who had been standing stock still, like they had been stitched to the spot, are suddenly free to move. I hear them rush over to the temple master, frantically asking if he's okay. The sound of their voices echoes distantly in my ears as I look toward the head priest.

"And just how do you expect me to do that?" I snarl at him, tilting my head to the side. He moans, clutching at his chest. "Urgh... like... you usually do?"

"You called me out here to have a friendly conversation, and then suddenly start shouting orders and attacking us, and then when we dare to defend ourselves you threaten us with the death penalty. Please, enlighten me, how might I control my anger? I don't quite understand how."



I snort disdainfully as I look away from the head priest and focus my gaze once again on the temple master. He sits, slumped against the wall. Unlike before, he can't even bring himself to meet my eyes. He *whimpers*, terror written plainly on his features, and I can't help but laugh a little, putting a bit of my rage behind.

What a funny face.

This isn't the face of a kindly old man, nor the face of an arrogant noble. This is the face of a man who looks at a weak little girl and cowers like he's seeing a monster. I get a little irritated at how this many-faced temple master can't seem to stay anything to me, and take a single step forward.

"G... get away! Get away from me! Don't come any closer!"

His breathing is ragged as he yells at me, like he's in great pain. He's just saying the same thing over and over, like he's so panicked he can't even come up with anything else to say.

Over my right shoulder, I hear the head priest hurriedly calling out to me.

"Please, wait! If you keep letting your emotions control your mana like this, Father Bösewanz's heart will give out!"

"Hmmm?" I say, taking one slow, measured step after another towards the temple master. "I don't mind if he dies, though. If he lives, then he's going to have my mother and father killed, isn't he? So perhaps he should die before he has the chance to do that. If you're willing to kill someone, aren't you supposed to be prepared to be killed yourself? Perhaps you should be happy about this! Aren't you next in line for his position if he dies?"

With my fourth step forward, the temple master goes limp, his eyes wide and mouth frothing. In the next instant, the head priest steps in to block my view. He kneels down in front of me. He grits his teeth as if in great pain, a cold sweat dripping down his face, but looks at me with a very serious expression.

"Let us talk."

"Talk'? You mean with our fists? Ah, or perhaps with our magic?"

The head priest's eyes open wide, and he starts coughing violently. A bit of blood leaks from the corner of his mouth. I am captivated by the sight of the bright red drop.

“Don’t kill him,” he says. “If you kill Father Bösewanz, your entire family will be killed by the nobles. I don’t think that is what you want, is it?”

His words give me a moment of clarity. I can’t let my desire to protect my parents run so rampant that I get my entire family executed. I blink, rapidly, and a long, exhausted sigh slips through the head priest’s lips.

“Have you come to your senses?” he says.

“...Probably.”

The head priest slumps with relief. He pulls a handkerchief out of his breast pocket, wipes his mouth, and straightens his disheveled bangs. And, with that, he looks as cool and composed as he would have been if nothing had ever happened at all.

“Let’s have a conversation,” he says. “Like you want.”

“And you’ll actually listen to all of our demands?”

He flinches, then lightly shakes his head. He lays a hand on my shoulder.

“...If you want that to happen, I need you to get your mana under control. Do you think you can do that?”

I take in a slow, deep breath, gathering up all of the heat that had spread throughout my body and compressing it deep down, back into my heart. This is something I do a lot, but I can’t help but feel like there’s more of the devouring fever than I thought there would be.

Ah, but it’s not the devouring fever, though. It’s mana?

I tell myself that it doesn’t matter either way as I finish tidying up the last of it and sealing it tightly away. In that instant, all of the strength leaves my body, and I collapse like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Oop,” says the head priest, reaching out to catch me as I crumple in front of him, saving me from falling to the floor.

“Maïne!”

“Are you okay?!”

My parents rush over, and the head priest picks me up, handing me to them. My mother kneels down and takes me, hugging me tightly against her. My father nervously looks down at me, eyes filled with worry as I dangle limply in my mother's grasp.

"I'm okay," I say. "The devouring fever went wild for a bit so my temperature went up and down very fast, that's all. It happens all the time. I'm still wide awake."

"It happens all the time?" says my father, uneasy. "That?"

I manage a small smile. "It's rare for my emotions to run wild like that, but half a year ago when it looked like the devouring was going to swallow me up, my fever was going wild quite often."

While I talk to my parents, the head priest stands up and talks to the priests, giving them instructions on how to deal with the present situation. He asks some of them to look after the temple master, and others to go prepare a room for us to have our discussion in.

"You two, get Father Bösewanz into his bed, then go to your rooms and rest as well. Taking that much magical coercion head-on must have left you exhausted."

"But Father Ferdinand, what about you...?"

As the worried-sounding priest says, the person who should be the most exhausted here isn't any of the priests that had been off to the side, but the head priest himself. He'd stepped between me and the temple master, putting himself directly in front of me, and met me eye-to-eye as we talked.

"Are you... really okay?" I ask without thinking, suddenly remembering the blood leaking from the corner of his mouth.

The head priest looks at me, startled, then smiles wryly. "This is my punishment," he says. "I had no idea just how much mana someone who had managed to survive the devouring up until their baptism might have, yet I sat quietly aside as Father Bösewanz made you so angry. It's only natural."

Now that he's finished giving instructions, he walks slowly over to me. Now that he's closer, I can hear just how ragged his breathing really is. It's plain to see how hard he's pushing himself.

"Why were you just observing?"

"I had been thinking that it would be best for us if we could get you to join the temple

without any extra conditions. It would save a lot of trouble for us, and I must confess I was a little greedy over what we would gain from the arrangement. I hadn't even considered that your parents, commoners, would have ever refused an order from a nobleman, let alone be prepared to face capital punishment in order to protect you."

As the head priest murmurs about how far out of his expectations this was, my father narrows his eyes at him.

"Maïne is our precious daughter. How many times do I have to tell you this, sir?"

The head priest looks down at me. He smiles a complicated smile, with hints of self-recrimination and a thought that he had looked at something terribly radiant. He gently strokes my head as I rest in my mother's arms.

"...Maïne, I am quite honestly jealous of how loved you are by your parents. After all, those of us here at the temple, whether we are orphans or noblemen, are people whose parents did not need."

These incredibly sad words, said to me in this dazzlingly extravagant room, will stay in my heart for the entire time I stay at the temple.



With the temple master put to bed, we relocate to the head priest's room so that we can have our conversation. The basic arrangement of the room and the quality of the furniture is the same as the temple master's, but there's no display shelf here. In its place is what appears to be a work desk, covered with wooden boards and pieces of parchment. It seems like the head priest is responsible for singlehandedly managing the practical business of the temple.

This time, we're properly asked to take a seat at the table. Since I still can't move my body at all, I am propped up on a sofa. Then, we begin our discussion.

"On a previous note," says my father, "you mentioned 'coercion', right? May I ask what that might be? Maïne's eyes were glowing with a rainbow light, and yellow mist was rising off of her..."

What the hell?! I had no idea that such bizarre phenomena was happening! Rainbow eyes and weird mist, what the hell?!

My eyes almost pop out of their sockets when I hear him say that. I'm the only one who didn't know about it (or, rather, hadn't seen it), so my silent astonishment goes largely unnoticed and the conversation quickly continues.

"It's a phenomenon that occurs when one's emotions run rampant. Mana is circulated through the body and activated, and a coercive effect is applied to anyone that one considers to be an enemy. It's something that happens frequently in children who have a hard time controlling their emotions; surely you've seen it at least once?"

My parents look at each other, trying to remember.

"I've seen her eyes change colors a few times," says my mother. "Usually when she's acting spoiled. It was never something that I'd describe as 'coercion', though. She usually settled down when I told her she was being unreasonable."

"Come to think of it," says my father, "there was one time when she'd gone to the forest to make something, then Fey and the others destroyed it. I think that was the first time I saw it. It *was* a little intimidating."

My parents are having a lively conversation as they start remembering things, but I, the third party to this conversation, am only growing more and more intensely aware of my own strangeness. I'm pretty sure a little girl whose eyes change colors and starts to give off an intimidating vibe whenever she started being unreasonable would be described as, quite frankly, creepy.

It wouldn't have been strange for them to get rid of me. Man, they've taken great care to try to raise me right...

"The amount of influence depends on the amount of mana used," says the head priest, "so it's likely that the difference in power compared to those previous incidents is caused by Maïne having gradually gained more and more mana. Please, take care not to cause her to run wild like that in the future."

"If nothing extraordinary happens," I say, "I won't lose control of my emotions."

When I indirectly point blame at the temple master for causing me to lose control, the head priest stares at me for a moment, narrowing his eyes.

"I'd heard that having the devouring generally means that someone has a comparatively large amount of mana, but I hadn't thought that you'd be able to release

so much that your coercion would cause the temple master to faint. ...If I may ask, how are you still alive?"

"Huh?"

I don't know how to answer that one. I tilt my head, not fully understanding the question, and the head priest starts to explain.

"You need to have a force of will that is stronger than the mana you are trying to keep bottled up. For a child who doesn't know that they must keep their emotions in check, the amount of mana that they can endure with their fragile wills is quite frankly not very large. If a child is born with strong magic, they die quickly. Since the amount of mana one possesses multiplies as one grows older, the magical strength of a child who has survived all the way to their baptism is not anything to fear. It is odd that someone with magic as powerful as yours has survived for as long as you have."

"I'm pretty sure I've been close to death. A very kind person sold me a broken magical tool, once, which allowed me to live a little longer."

The original Maïne died two years ago. Then, if Freida hadn't saved me, I would probably have died half a year ago. Like the head priest says, making it all the way to my baptism while having the devouring was no easy task.

"I see. But did you not wish to have this kind person help you find a noble with which to make a contract? Without a contract you wouldn't be able to continue living. Granted, it is only because you did not make such a contract that you were able to meet us like this, but I can't help but wonder why you would have made this choice."

He really does look curious. I tilt my head to the side as well.

"If making a contract with a noble means I'll be locked away, there's not much point to living anymore, is there? I wanted to stay with my family. I wanted to make books. I wanted to live for my own sake, because otherwise it would be meaningless."

"...Living for your own sake... I simply can't understand thinking like that."

He shakes his head, takes a slow breath to steady himself, then looks at me, my mother, and my father in turn before opening his mouth to speak.

"Maïne, I wish for you to join the temple. This is not an order, but a request."

"I heard from a merchant that the number of nobles here in the temple has been decreasing, so you don't have enough mana, correct? Is it really true that you use magic

to help the crops grow?”

“...What a well-informed merchant. Well, alright then.”

It seems that somehow Benno managed to acquire accurate information. If that’s the case, then the lack of mana really will have terrible, far-reaching effects.

“Can you not cooperate with the other nobility?” I ask.

“There are various other magical tools that must be kept running in order to protect the city. The fundamental basis of our city’s defenses are its magical tools, after all.”

I’d been wondering why the other nobles weren’t bothering to help, but it seems like they’ve got other things that they need to do.

“The temple master being who he is,” says the head priest, “the majority of the practical business of running the temple falls to me. It is very unusual for a child with the devouring to have as much mana as you do. As promised, I’ll accommodate you as best as I can.”

“Dad, I’ll leave it to you.”

He’s taking our conditions seriously. Now it’s time for my father, the head of the house, to take over. My mother gently strokes my head. “You look so tired. You should rest now,” she says, but I must make sure I stay awake to listen. This conversation is all about my future; if I don’t pay proper attention, Benno’s going to smack me on the head again. As I continue to recline on the couch, I watch my father’s discussion with the head priest closely.

“Then, sir, here are our conditions,” says my father. “If what you need most from Maïne is her mana, then we would like for her to be treated more like a noble priest. She absolutely cannot be put to the same work as the gray-robed priests.”

The head priests nods, not having to give it much thought.

“I’ll have a special blue outfit prepared for her. She’ll have the same duties as the younger nobles, which largely consist of tending to the magical tools here. This is what I was originally intending to suggest, had the temple master not gone so wild, so I have no objections. How would it sound if I were to have her both tend to the magical tools and, as she has requested, work in the library as well?”

My opinion of the head priest, who is offering me permission to enter the library with

no strings attached, is skyrocketing.

He may have a cool demeanor, but he risked his own well-being to stop me, he's skilled enough to singlehandedly manage the temple's affairs, he read the scriptures to me, he's letting me into the library, he's letting me into the library, *he's letting me into the library!*

"Father Ferdinand, you're such a good person!"

"Uh?"

It seems my deeply heartfelt joy did not reach him. He and my father give me a single, fleeting glance, and then simply return to their conversation.

"Next, if our daughter were to be kept here at the temple out of our sight, we would be constantly worried sick. We would like for her to be able to come home. We don't have any intention of giving her up."

"...Hmm, I see. Since Maïne is not an orphan, she should be able to go home. Practically, many of the nobility here have homes to go back to as well, so this shouldn't pose any problems."

"Pardon me," says my mother, "but Maïne is very frail, so she won't be able to perform her duties every day. Is there something you can do about this?"

My mother lightly covers my mouth with one hand, prohibiting me from speaking, as she moves the conversation forward.

"There's no need for her to push herself when she's not feeling up to it. You implied that she's able to go to the forest when she's well enough; she's not incapable of moving, is she?"

Frustrated at myself for having spoken out of turn before, I shake my head, making eye contact with the head priest.

"Even if I'm feeling okay, it's pointless if I don't have Lutz with me."

"Lutz? The boy who came to pick you up the other day?"

"Yes, sir. He's always been helping me manage my health. If he's not with me, I often collapse suddenly and my fever comes back. I need to have someone to help me with managing my condition."

Before I can continue onto my next thought, which would have been that I'll only be

able to come at Lutz's convenience on days when my health is good, the head priest nods. Without saying anything, he jots something down on a nearby board.

"Ahh, so you'll be needing attendants? I have no objections there. Blue-robed priests and priestesses generally have several assigned to them."

"Huh?"

Did he just say "attendants"? Having several people assigned to me would actually be really hard on me, though?

As I sit there in mute bewilderment, the head priest looks away from me, glancing at my parents.

"Do you have any objections so far? Any further conditions?"

He's absolutely fine making whatever compromise he needs to. It seems like Benno was right: these people will do anything to make sure that I join the temple.

"Um," I say, "Father Ferdinand. I'm currently registered with the merchants' guild. Will I be able to continue operating my workshop?"

"...The temple master must have told you that you'll have no use for that while in service of the gods."

This is the first thing he's disapproved of. He frowns intensely, deep in thought. Just as Benno taught me, I start to negotiate.

"...However, I've been operating this workshop forever. It's my main source of income. You run an orphanage here, don't you? If I hired the orphan children to work for a wage, and set aside some of the profits from my products to donate to the church, could we possibly work something out?"

Unlike the temple master, who I'm sure would have rejected me without a second thought, the head priest is in charge of the day-to-day affairs of the temple. This, of course, must include their accounting. As Benno said, with fewer nobles, there are fewer donations coming in, so the temple must be in need of money. As I watch him, waiting patiently for his answer, he sighs, rubbing his temples. "Just how much do you know?" he mutters, sadly.

"...Very well. We'll have a more detailed discussion in the future about the percentage

of your profits that you'll be setting aside, then put that in writing. As of now, I don't have enough information to be able to talk about this."

"I understand. Let's leave talking about donations and money until a later date."

I don't really want to have the conversation about donations in front of my parents. The head priest, perhaps noticing this, quirks one eyebrow, but says nothing, instead looking back at my parents again.

"Any other conditions?"

"No, sir. If she's given blue robes, is allowed to live at home, and can keep an eye on her health, then as her parents we have no objections. Thank you for your consideration."



When we finished our discussion, the head priest invites us to lunch. However, the three of us leave immediately, with my mother saying that it would be best for us to let the head priest get some rest. As we pass through the towering gates of the temple, I see the refreshingly clear, blue skies spreading out before me, and I'm struck with a renewed sense of liberation. I've solved all of the problems that have been plaguing me.

We head home, my father carrying me in his arms. We walk in silence for a while, but when the central plaza comes into view, signaling that we've returned to our usual sphere of existence, my father murmurs, "We did it, huh..."

"Yeah," I reply.

"We just won, didn't we?" he says, expressionlessly.

I give him my biggest smile, nodding vigorously. "Yeah! A really big win. Mom, Dad, thank you for protecting me."

I finally have recovered a bit of my strength, so I make a loose fist and bend my elbow. My father, breaking into his usual smile, holds me in one arm, and makes a fist with his other.

"Nah, you were the one protecting us, weren't you? With that 'coercion' thing."

"Nuh-uh, that just me getting so mad that my fever went wild. I don't really remember it that well."

Chuckling to each other, my father and I tap our fists together. We managed to get

every single one of our demands met, though the financial conversation will come later. I'll have to talk to Benno about that and come up with a really solid plan so that I can definitely win next time, too.

"I'm a little relieved myself," says my mother. "Since that head priest is there, I'm sure things will turn out alright."

I tilt my head curiously. Certainly, the head priest seems like a very capable person, but I don't know why looking at him would set my mother's mind at ease.

"He stopped you, didn't he? You always just take off running in whatever direction you please, so not having anyone to stop you would be terrible. Even if something happens that makes your mana go wild, you'll have someone there to hold you down and scold you. That's a very important thing."

That's exactly the kind of reason I would expect my mother to give. I can easily imagine my days at the temple being full of the head priest scolding me with my mother's full approval.

"...He's going to get mad at me a lot."

Both of my parents laugh at my prediction.

I think about how if I hadn't been able to stop the temple master, I wouldn't be looking at this scene right now. I let out a sigh, relieved that I'm actually able to return home with my family.

I'm so glad. I went a little wild, but I didn't mess up.

We turn off of the main road and head along the narrow alleyway that leads to our building. When the plaza comes into view, I see Tuuli, pacing nervously by the water well, obviously waiting for us to come home.

"Tuuli!" I call out, beaming broadly.

"Maïne! You're okay! You really came home!"

When she sees me, she immediately starts running towards us, trampling the weeds in her path. My father sets me down, leaving a hand at my back to keep me propped up. Tuuli leaps at me, hugging me tightly.

“I’m so glad you’re back, Maïne! I was waiting forever!”

Tuuli is so happy that tears are welling in her eyes. I smile back at her.

“I’m glad to be back too.”

Chapter 73

Interlude: Visiting Miss Corinna's House

My name is Tuuli! I'm eight years old.

When my little sister Maïne said she got everything figured out at the temple about becoming a sister-in-training, I was super relieved. She's not going to die because of the devouring, and she's not going to be a gray-robed priestess and get treated like an orphan. I was really scared that she'd go away and I'd never see her again, but that's not going to happen, and I'm *super* happy about that!

The day after Mom and Dad got called out to the temple, Maïne headed out to go to Mister Benno's shop. She said that she needed to ask him some things about how she should be dealing with the head priest, and that while she was there she was going to figure out what day she was going to meet with Miss Corinna. Last time she met with her, she went all by herself, and I was stuck at home. This time, though, Maïne said that she'd ask Miss Corinna if I could come too.

Aaahh, I'm really looking forward to this! My Maïne is such a good girl, always thinking of her big sister! I'm gonna get to brag to *all* my friends at the workshop about how I got to go to Miss Corinna's house.

Miss Corinna's really amazing! When she came of age, she got her own workshop, and then she started getting orders from the nobility to make clothes for them. To apprentice seamstresses like me, she's like a shining star in the sky, someone that one day we want to be just like.

The story of how her amazing husband proposed to her super dramatically is like a legend you'd hear from a minstrel. All the apprentice seamstresses talk about it. For the sake of his love, he cast aside his dreams of being a merchant, spent all of the money he'd saved up, and then proposed to her! Hearing rumors like that, it's really obvious to see that he really loves her a lot. It's the kind of story that every girl wants to be part of.

I wonder what kind of person Miss Corinna is? All I know is that Maïne said that she

was really nice, and also really pretty.



The front door opens, and Maïne comes leaping in. “I’m home, Tuuli!” she says, beaming. “Miss Corinna said that she definitely wants to see you and Mom too. Tomorrow afternoon, she said.”

From how hard she’s panting, it looks like she was kinda hurrying home. Immediately after she tells me about this, she collapses on the spot.

“Maïne?!” I say.

“Urgh... I really wanted to come home and tell you as quick as I could, maybe I over did it? Sorry.”

“It’ll be a big problem if you can’t actually make it out there tomorrow. Come sit down and take a break.”

Maïne flops limply into a chair, and her glossy, dark blue hair falls down behind her. She’s always trying her best at a lot of different things, so she’s gotten a little bit healthier, but she’s definitely still not actually strong, and she’s still not getting any bigger. She still looks like she’s four years old, and I really can’t help but worry about her.

When she stands next to Lutz, who’s the same age as her, she looks like his little sister, and lately when she goes to the forest, kids two years younger than her offer to help her out, which always makes her slump over dejectedly. She’s not weak just because she has the devouring. Even when she got cured, she was still really frail. She said that Freida, who has the same disease, doesn’t have that problem.

Maïne rubs at her temples. “...Hmm, am I doing better now?” she says.

She stands up, then starts slowly moving around. She carefully folds up her nice dress and puts it in the bag that she made herself and really likes, making sure that it doesn’t get dirty, then puts her hairpin in as well. As soon as I realize that she’s getting her things ready for tomorrow, I ask her a question.

“Maïne, what about me? Do I need to do anything to get ready?”

“No, I can’t think of anything... but since it’s such a special occasion, maybe we should wash our hair with rinsham?”

“Yeah!”

Maïne and I start washing our hair with the rinsham I made. I didn't used to wash it this much, but lately I guess I've started thinking that I need to keep myself looking nice. Even at a workshop, the only people who can talk to customers and show them around are people who make sure they're dressed very neatly.

“Hey, Maïne,” I say. “Today, they let me sit at the front desk for the first time!”

“Wow, really? That's great, Tuuli!”

“It's all thanks to you,” I say.

A while back, when I was grumbling to Maïne about how only pretty people got to meet with the customers at work, she said to me, “It's because first impressions are vital when dealing with customers. It is absolutely something that merchants pay attention to. If you want to go from someone who only works in the back room making things to someone who gets to work publicly with customers, then you have to make sure to keep yourself clean, pay attention to your manners, and so on.” It was cautionary advice about a merchant's viewpoint.

She also said that I should make sure that my work clothes are nice enough that customers can see me in, and in order to make sure that they don't get dirty I should wear an apron that even covers my sleeves. That way, if I have to talk to a customer, then I can take off the apron, and be wearing clean clothes. I took her advice to heart, and now I'm in a place where I can do work that involves talking to customers, too.

“I'm home,” says Mom, as she comes through the front door.

She arrives as Maïne and I are in the middle of talking about what we've gotten done today as we carefully wash our hair. When she sees us drying our hair and thoroughly combing it out, her eyes widen slightly.

“Oh my, you're using rinsham? ...Does that mean...?”

“Yep!” says Maïne. “Tomorrow, we get to go to Miss Corinna's house.”

Mom, when she hears this, immediately tells me and Maïne that we're on dinner duty today and starts washing her hair. Since we definitely understand that she wants to make herself as pretty as possible before meeting with Miss Corinna, Maïne and I just shrug at each other and give up our seats.

“I’m going to wear the new summer dress you just finished making for me tomorrow,” I say to Mom.

“Good idea. That’ll keep you cool, and you look good in it, too.”

The cloth that we didn’t need to use to make Maïne’s dress has turned into a new summer dress for me, instead. Unlike Maïne, I’m actually growing healthily, so I’m always getting too big for my clothes really quickly.

There wasn’t enough cloth to make the entire dress, so the skirt part was actually sewn together patchwork-style out of a few different colors of cloth in order to be long enough. It wound up looking like it’s decorative, so it looks really cute. It’s my favorite dress.

I wonder if Miss Corinna is going to think it looks cute, too?



The next day, the three of us leave the house fairly early, making sure that we’ll be able to get there in time even going at Maïne’s walking speed. As we pass through the central plaza and enter the north side of town, the clothes of the people around us start to get more colorful, and I start seeing people who are wearing clothes with lots of cloth. Since it’s rare for me to come to the north part of town, I look down self-consciously at my own clothes, wondering if I’m sticking out too much. When I look up at Mom, I see that she looks a little worried about how other people are looking at her too. Maïne, however, doesn’t look the least bit worried. In fact, she seems really energetic! She’s still really slow, though.

“Miss Corinna’s house is right above Mister Benno’s shop,” she says.

When she says that, it starts to make sense. Mom and I have only heard Maïne talk about these things. We haven’t seen them ourselves. Maïne, though, comes this way with Lutz a lot. There’s no way she’d be worried.

“Oh no, how should I introduce myself?” says Mom.

“You could start with ‘it’s nice to meet you’, right?” says Maïne. “Then maybe something like ‘thank you for inviting us here’? And then when you meet Mister Benno and Mister Mark, you could say ‘thank you for looking after my daughter’, I think.”

Maïne immediately has an answer ready for our very stressed-out Mom. We don’t

usually need to formally introduce ourselves, but maybe when working at the gates or at a shop, this is the kind of thing you need to be able to bring out immediately, I wonder? She didn't hesitate at all.

"Maïne, how about me? How do I introduce myself?"

"Just put on your cutest smile!" she says, beaming. "I can't think of anyone who wouldn't be happy if you smile and say how much you've been looking forward to meeting them."

Mom and I start practicing our introductions as we walk. Maïne watches us, looking amused. Since she's wearing her apprentice's clothes, she really blends in here, unlike me and Mom. I suddenly feel like there's a side of her that we don't know about. It's a strange, uncomfortable, almost frustrating sort of feeling.



"Miss Corinna, hello~!"

Maïne is completely unperturbed as she knocks on the door. Mom and I, on the other hand, are not. With every floor we passed as we climbed the stairs, Mom started shivering more and more, and I couldn't stop my legs from wobbling with every step.

Wait a bit, Maïne! I'm still not ready!

Before I have a chance to settle my nerves, the door opens. "Maïne, hello, come in!" says Corinna. She looks up at us. "You must be Maïne's mother and sister. Welcome! I'm Corinna. Please, come in."

The door has opened to reveal a beautiful, charming woman. She is way younger and prettier than I even imagined. Her glossy, pale, cream-colored hair shines like moonlight, and her thin, gentle eyes are a gray that gleams like silver as she looks at us with the kindest expression. Even though her colors are make her look almost ephemeral, she also has a really good figure. The parts of her that are supposed to stick out stick way out, and her waist is very narrow. Her body is the womanly ideal.

"Miss Corinna, it's nice to meet you," says Mom. "My name is Eva; I'm Maïne's mother. Thank you very much for inviting us here today."

Mom delivers her rehearsed introduction, slightly bending her knees and lowering her

chest in a small curtsy. I copy what she did, and introduce myself too.

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Corinna! My name’s Tuuli. I’ve been really looking forward to coming here. I’m happy I get to meet you!”

“I’ve been looking forward to meeting you as well. When I saw Maïne’s dress, even from far away, it stood out a lot to me. I thought I definitely had to see it up close. Sorry if I’m being a little selfish, calling you all the way out here.”

Corinna’s gentle smile is infectious, and I can’t stop myself from smiling too. Her smile is as warm as a clear spring day.

“Please, wait here for a moment. I’ll go get some tea ready.”

The room that Miss Corinna brings us to looks like it’s a room that she uses for work, filled with embroidered cloth and samples of the clothing that she’s made. There’s so many decorations, this is a really wonderful-looking room. There’s a couple of tables in the room; one in the middle, that looks like it’s for talking, and one off to the side that looks like it’s for working. The table we’ve got in our kitchen that we use for literally everything doesn’t even come close.

Aaaaaa!! This is so amazing~!

Both Mom and me can’t keep our eyes off of all of the clothing set up around the room and the colorful tapestries hung up on the walls. I never thought that I’d ever see something this beautiful. I slowly spin around, taking it all in, one thing at a time. Every single thing is sewn neatly, colored brilliantly, richly decorated, and sewn into designs that are completely different from anything I’ve ever worn. I sigh in complete wonder, looking at these decorations.

“So pretty...” I murmur. “how in the world do I learn how to make things like this? I’d never think to make any of these designs. Is it really just practice?”

“Skill is very important, yeah,” says Maïne. “but if you want to come up ideas like those, looking at lots of good examples is just as important, too.”

I wasn’t expecting her to say anything, so I turn to look at her. She seems tired, sitting all alone in her chair, legs lazily dangling as she looks at me with her golden eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“If you’re not paying attention to what rich people are wearing, what kind of fads and

trends there are, and so on, then you won't have any ideas like this. Miss Corinna was born into money, so she's naturally surrounded by good examples. That's why she knows about what's good to make."

"So, then, it's impossible for me?"

I slump my shoulders, having been told that I can never get there no matter how hard I try. Maïne, though, shakes her head, saying "no, that's not it."

"I know that going to the forest on your days off is still really important, but whenever you can, you should head past the central plaza and take a walk in the northern parts of town. There's lots of rich people walking around there, and there's lots of shops where those kinds of people shop, you know? Lots of different kinds of clothes on display. If you compare them, then you can figure out what kinds of colors and designs are fashionable right now, and use those as reference, I think."

On my days off, I've been going to the forest, but have never gone to the north part of town. I actually think I can count the number of times I've gone north past the central plaza on one hand. I hadn't realized that going someplace where rich people are would be a good source of information about the kinds of things rich people liked to wear.

"And then, the patterns on these tapestries and the flowers on this embroidery... this is all stuff you can find in the forest, you know? If you take a good look around you at things like that, when you have to come up with a design I'm sure you'll think of something useful."

"...Okay. I'll try that!"

It looks like Maïne looks at this clothing and these decorations completely differently compared to me. I wonder if the difference between me, who was swept away by how pretty everything is, and her is the difference between a craftswoman and a merchant? I try to keep my feelings in check as I stare intently at Miss Corinna's work, focusing on trying to find some sort of new technique that I can borrow, even how I am now.

"Oh my, Tuuli," says Miss Corinna, entering the room with a servant woman in tow. "I'm a little embarrassed that you're looking so closely."

"I never see clothes like this anywhere, so I don't get any chance to look at them like this. I'm an apprentice seamstress, but they still don't let me work on big things like clothing yet..."

Lately, I've finally started to be given work to do on small accessories and stitchery in

places that won't be noticed, but I'm still a long ways away from being able to make clothes all by myself.

"Practicing the basics is very important! You need to be able to make a nice, straight stitch if you want to make beautiful clothing."

"I'll try my hardest! Um, Miss Corinna? How did you sew this part here?"

"Oh, this? Well..."

As the servant woman sets up some tea and sweets on the table, Miss Corinna explains a few things about the various pieces of clothing around the room. At some point, Mom joins in, listening along with me. Maïne is the only one left out, looking uninterested as she sits at the table.

"Please, eat!"

"Thank you very much."

At Miss Corinna's urging, I take a sip of tea. It's amazing, completely unlike the tea we drink at home. It feels like the flavor's spreading out all through my mouth.

"This is really good!"

"I'm glad that you like it," says Miss Corinna, smiling sweetly.

I glance at my family to see if they agree. Mom's making a face that looks like she thinks it's good, but can't stop thinking about how much it costs, and Maïne has her eyes closed, entranced by the flavor.

"Please, have some of this too."

Miss Corinna pushes a plate towards me, on which is a pastry made of a thin, bread-like dough topped with fruit and honey. I pick up a slice of it, then take a bite.

Hmmm, it's *good*, but compared to this I like the recipes that Maïne's been teaching me even better.

A little while ago, Maïne went to Frieda's house to teach her a recipe, and came back with a bag of sugar in exchange. Then she started teaching me how to make all sorts of sweets I'd never even heard of, like "crepes", "compote", and "pseudo-cookies". She even says that when it gets colder out she wants to make something called "pudding", but it seems like it needs to be cooled so it won't work during the summer. She also

put some fruit, some sugar, and some alcohol in a pot and sealed it up. She says that she's making something that'll be full of summer flavor by the time winter comes around. I can't wait!

"This is delicious, and so sweet," says Maïne, taking another bite. "I'm so envious that you can use so much honey on these..."

Corinna smiles wryly. "If that's how you feel, why don't you buy some yourself? You've certainly made Benno bitter enough to afford it."

"I'm keeping my workshop's funds separate from my own personal spending money."

After we finish eating, we immediately take out Maïne's dress. Mom and Maïne show it to Miss Corinna, and they explain all the alterations that we made. Miss Corinna picks it up and looks over it carefully, inspecting the backs of the seams and rolling up the hems.

"I never would have guessed this was an alteration," she says.

"It would have been much easier to make something from scratch," agrees Maïne.

As Maïne explains, Miss Corinna writes something on a little wooden board. She looks just like Maïne does when she's writing on her slate or on her paper. I start to wonder if maybe I should learn how to read and write, too. Being able to write like that is actually kinda cool, I think.

"And this is the hairpin, hm..." murmurs Miss Corinna, picking up the hairpin. The strands of small white flowers sway as she turns it over in her hands. "This is the first time I've seen anything like it."

"I made the big white one here," I say, proudly.

"Oh! It's very beautiful, Tuuli," she replies.

Being praised by Miss Corinna makes my heart melt.

She traces a pale fingertip along the flower. "This hairpin is really beautiful. ...I think I might want to make ones like these at my workshop; would that be alright?"

She smiles, gently tilting her head. This is the most amazingly astounding thing that could possibly happen. I hadn't even dreamed that Miss Corinna would like the hairpin so much that she'd want to make something like it herself! Overjoyed, I open my mouth, ready to say "Of course!!", but before the words leave my mouth Maïne shakes her head.

“There are terms,” she says.
I choke. “M... Ma... Maïne?!”

I absolutely can *not* believe that Maïne, after having finally been called all the way out to Miss Corinna’s house, would make demands! My eyes nearly pop out of my head. Maïne looks at me, raising her hand to calm me down.

“These hairpins are our winter’s handiwork, one of our most important sources of income. We can’t just give away permission to anyone we want. No matter how much they say they want to make it, if they don’t buy the rights to do so, then that only hurts us.”

Maïne’s words are like cold water thrown in my face. It’s true, these hairpins are a very, very good source of income for us. I suddenly remember just how much money we’d made last winter, and lose interest in stopping her.

“Alright, then, please talk with my brother about that.”

Miss Corinna rings a bell. The servant lady appears, and Miss Corinna tells her to go get her brother. Soon, I hear footsteps coming up the stairs.

“Corinna, I got your message, what’s... Ah, you must be Maïne’s family? It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Benno, Corinna’s older brother.”

So, then, is this the Mister Benno that’s done so much for Maïne?

His light, curly hair, the color of milk tea, frames his kind looking face and his reddish-brown eyes. The way he smiles so sociably makes him look very much like Miss Corinna, and his easy, friendly introduction leaves me with the impression that he’s a very good person.

“I’m Eva, Maïne’s mother. Thank you for looking after my daughter.”
“I’m Tuuli! Hello.”

My mother introduces herself, and I frantically follow suit. Mister Benno smiles broadly, nodding at the two of us in turn, then looks down at Maïne, quirkling an eyebrow.

“Maïne, what is it this time?”

“A request from Miss Corinna. She wants the rights to make my hairpins. How much are you willing to buy them for?”

“Business, then?”

“Business, sir.”

Benno nods, and his demeanor changes in a single, terrifying instant. As soon as a truly merchant-like expression appears on his face, the gentle air about him disappears entirely. With a thud, he sits down roughly in a chair across from Maïne, a fierce glint in his eyes as he stares at her.

“This much,” he says, holding up several fingers.

Maïne scoffs. “I certainly can’t sell it for that little. I’d rather take this to Freida instead.”

Even though she is seated directly in front of Benno, who is giving off a terrifyingly menacing air, Maïne’s expression doesn’t flicker in the slightest bit as she turns down his offer like it’s the most obvious thing to do. Instead, she looks like she might even be a little gleeful when faced with this competition.

“We’ve already decided that the things Maïne’s Workshop makes would be sold through Lutz, haven’t we?”

“The things Maïne’s Workshop *makes*, correct? That doesn’t include recipes or rights, you know?”

“You *cheeky* little...!”

Benno’s exasperated shout causes Mom and I, who are still seated at the same table as these two, to flinch back in shock. Maïne, however, just smiles sweetly, tilting her head curiously to the side.

“Oh, speaking of which, Mister Benno! How much did you decide you’re selling rinsham for? I had a chat with Freida, and it seems that when it comes to the rights for a completely new product that has no other competition, prices should *start* at no lower than a large gold coin, shouldn’t they? I think I might have been selling my ideas to you for *very* reasonable rates! Hee hee hee~...”

I’d heard her talk about it before, but this is the first time I’ve seen Maïne working as a merchant. I know that hearing about it and seeing it are two entirely different things, but seeing her dealing evenly with such a terrifying adult is leaving me completely dumbfounded.

What do I do? My little sister's scary...

At home, she's always worn out, she gets sick whenever she tries to do any work, and she's just as useless at helping around the house as she's always been, so this is the first time I've seen her take such an active, prominent role in something. I'm honestly shocked. I know she'd been aiming to become an apprentice merchant at Mister Benno's shop and gave it up because her health wouldn't allow it, but I wonder if she'd really wanted to stick with it? This *really* seems to suit her.

"This will take a while," says Miss Corinna, standing up suddenly. "Please, come this way."

"Huh? ...Huh?"

Corinna beckons us over to the table on the edge of the room. Mom and I exchange a look, then quietly stand up and follow her. I'm worried about Maïne, but even if we stayed with her, it really didn't feel like there was anything we could do to help her.

"My brother looks like he's enjoying himself *very* much, so it'll probably take a while," she says quietly, looking at the other table. "...That said, I'm really impressed by Maïne, how she's able to negotiate with my brother like that."

This is the first time I've ever realized how amazing Maïne can be. I'm her older sister, but I didn't know anything about this until just now.

"How about we leave the merchants' talk to those two, and have our own discussion about sewing? Remind me, we'd been talking about how I shaped this skirt to drape like it does, right?"

"Oh, yes! Please."

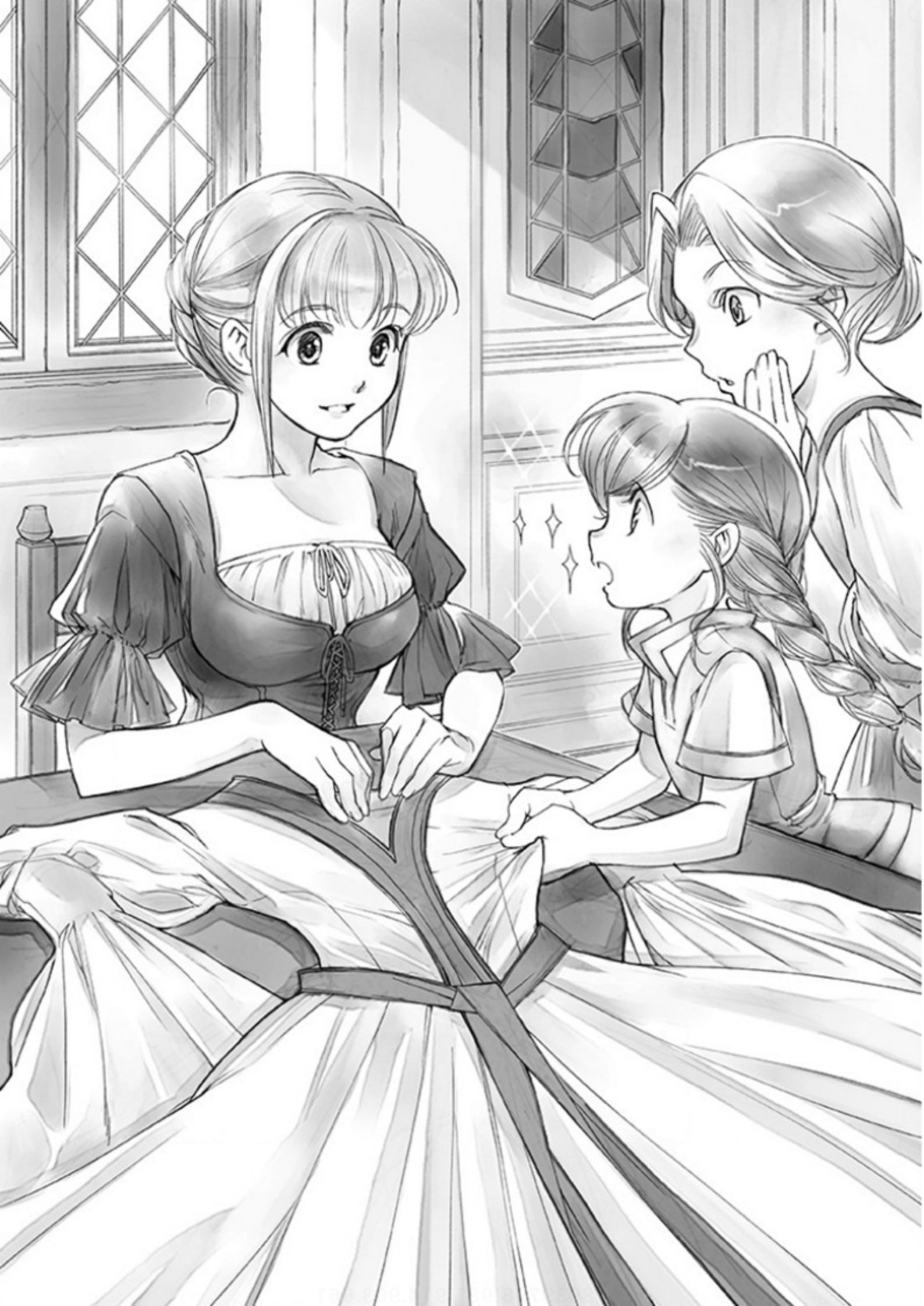
While the other table works their way through their haggling, a lively conversation about sewing grows at our table as we sip our tea. Miss Corinna kindly explains to us a lot about the kinds of styles and decorations that are currently in fashion with the nobility. It seems like there are a lot of different methods for sewing things, because she's mentioning names of things that, even when I hear them clearly, don't bring to mind anything that would help change the shape of a skirt. These are words that I would never hear at the workshop, no matter how much I talked with coworkers, and Miss Corinna is mentioning them one right after the others.

“What’s that there?”

Whenever I have a question, Miss Corinna kindly answers it for me. I’m happy, but I’m also feeling a little ashamed. I’ve been working as an apprentice for a *whole year* now. I didn’t think that I had so much left to learn. I’m fully realizing that just asking questions isn’t going to be enough. If I don’t put a lot of effort into practice and study, I’m never going to get to make any clothes for the customers.

“This is a kind of dress that is only just starting to come into fashion,” she says, gesturing at a dress that’s shown promptly in the center of a display.

It looks like the kind of dress that a noblewoman would wear to a fancy tea party. The cloth is glossy, the thread is fine, and the embroidery added here and there is simply splendid, and I can’t help but sigh in admiration.



"It's lovely," I say. "But, I can't believe that you'd need a whole dress just for one use. It seems like it's a huge waste of money to me..."

"Ah, you might be right. But think about it this way: when we sleep, when we go out, when we do dirty work... we have different kinds of clothes for different kinds of situations, don't we? When you have more money, then the situations you need different clothes for get more and more specific."

"Huh..."

Suddenly, there's a loud clatter from the other table, as if someone had stood up very forcefully. When I look over in shock, I see that both Maïne and Mister Benno have stood up and are staring right at each other, with only the table providing any separation between them.

"You're not the slightest bit cute anymore, girl."

"It's all thanks to your training, sir."

"Hmph, maybe I gave you too much advice..."

"Ah, but making sure you gather information from several sources so that you can be as accurate as possible is one of the fundamental principles of being a merchant, isn't it?"

The two of them shake hands, exchanging rueful smiles. It somehow feels like there is something dark lurking behind each of them that they're keeping restrained.

Yep, I don't think I could ever be a merchant, is the only thought that crosses my mind when I look at the two of them.

Maïne glances restlessly around the room, looking for us. When she spots us, she rushes over.

"We made a deal," she says as she gets closer, "so Mom, please teach Miss Corinna how to make the hairpins."

She grabs a cup of tea, which has grown cold by now, thanking Miss Corinna for bringing it out.

"Ahh... my throat got really dry."

"Good work," says Corinna. "May I ask, how much did you settle on? I'll be deciding how much I sell them for based on that."

Maïne glances nervously at me and Mom, then quickly holds up a few fingers for Miss Corinna to see. Miss Corinna gasps slightly as she looks at Maïne's outstretched fingers. This must be some sort of merchant-specific sign, I think. I can't help but get a little annoyed, since I have no idea what it actually means.

"We've decided that you'll make hairpins at your workshop for one year, and during that time you'll have a total monopoly on selling them."

"Even still, I'm impressed that you managed to get that much out of my brother."

Corinna really does seem impressed when she looks at Maïne. It seems like that finger sign translates to a particular amount of money.

"Hey, Maïne," I say. "How much is that?"

I'm legitimately curious as to how much the rights to make these hairpins might actually cost. When I ask, though, Maïne suddenly looks extremely troubled. She glances at Mom, then at Miss Corinna, then lets out a quiet moan.

"You can't say how much?"

"I mean, it's a perfectly reasonable price..." she says. "It's not like I *can't* say it, but I really don't want to..."

I keep pestering her, despite how pained she's sounding. Eventually, she gives in, not even bothering to hide how reluctant she's feeling.

"...One large and seven small gold coins," she mutters.

"What?! Did you say *gold* coins?!"

I'd thought that it was going to be expensive, but I'd been thinking that it was going to be a couple big silver coins. I was off by two entire digits, and the shock of it crashes into my brain like a bullet. My jaw drops, and Mom's eyes nearly bulge out of her skull.

"It sounds like a lot of money," she says, frantically waving her hands, "but it really is a fair price for selling the rights to something. I mean, this was Mister Benno. I really didn't rip him off! Also, these funds are for Maïne's Workshop, so it's not like this is my own money!"

No matter how desperately she's chucking out excuse after excuse, I can't believe at all that Maïne could have so calmly been dealing with a pile of money that huge.

I mean, these are large gold coins, right? It doesn't matter that she's insisting it's not her own money, but just how much does she have?! Is she secretly *really amazing*?! Wouldn't it be way better for her to be in business instead of going to the temple?



As I sit there, overwhelmed by the realization that not only do I have a long, long way to go with my sewing, but also that my little sister is actually amazing, our visit to Miss Corinna's house comes to a close.

Chapter 74

Interlude: Recipes for Desserts

My name is Ilse. I'm the house cook for the guildmaster of the merchant's guild. Hm? Didn't anyone tell you it was rude to ask a woman how old she is?

I set myself on the path to becoming a cook from a very early age. This was the most natural outcome for me, since my parents ran a restaurant when I was growing up. When I was very little, they just had a little food cart, but as I grew I watched them get set up in a small shop right inside the eastern gates. Because of all of the training they gave me, even before I started my apprenticeship I already knew how to cook and had a much better grasp of finances than the other pre-baptized children.

After my baptism, I apprenticed at a shop belonging to some acquaintances of my parents, and I quickly started absorbing as many new recipes as I could. Learning made me so happy, so I memorized every recipe I was taught, watched the other cooks around me to steal their recipes, and spent long hours seeing if I could make them even better than they already were.

As I bounced around from shop to shop, I got better to the point that people started telling me that maybe I should be working for the nobility. My parents objected, saying that there was a chance I'd never be able to come back home if I did that, but I brushed them off and went to work for a noble house. It's only natural, right? How could I possibly pass up the opportunity to learn the kinds of recipes that are prepared for the nobility?

I was put to work as the lowest of prep cooks, charged with doing the menial ingredient preparation and washing the dishes. There, I quickly started stealing the techniques of the head chef. I learned that the ingredients and seasonings used in the nobility's food are enormously different compared to what the rest of us eat. Even the plates they eat off of are more extravagant than anything you would see in any restaurant in the city. I spent every day studying every single detail.

However, that only lasted a few short years. No matter how hard I pursued my studies, I reached a point where I just couldn't climb any higher through the ranks. After all,

it's not skill that you need to rise to prominence in a noble house. It's your lineage and your connections.

My grumblings about this reached the ears of the guildmaster of the merchant's guild. He'd been out looking to a head chef to hire away from their position to work at his house, but when he heard about my skill and the fact that I was at a dead end in my career he offered to hire me. He told me that his granddaughter would be going to the nobles' quarter when she grew up, and he wanted me to make for her the kinds of food that the nobility eat. He didn't want her to face any hardships when she eventually left to go live there all by herself, he said.

I accepted on the spot. My chance to demonstrate my true skills as head chef had finally come around. On top of that, this was at the home of the guildmaster of the merchants' guild, who had more money than even some of the lesser nobility! He made sure that the kitchen was furnished with the same equipment you'd find in a nobleman's kitchen, and arranged for me to have access to the same ingredients and seasonings. This job had me doing exactly what any cook would dream of, in the perfect workspace. And, in order to make full use of this ideal environment, I have spent every day exercising my skill to my utmost. I have never before had a life more enjoyable and fulfilling than this.

I had utmost confidence in my skills.

I took great pride in all of the recipes I'd gathered throughout my career. Yes. Until Maïne came crashing in.

That was a shock.

Sugar is an ingredient that had only recently been introduced to this region from Central, and, even though this is the guildmaster's house, had only just become available to me here. There is no way that anyone here could have had time to establish any sort of culinary principles around its use. I'd been thinking up a variety of possible uses for it, but hadn't yet had enough time to do any proper experimentation with it.

Despite this, Maïne immediately produced desserts with it as if she'd been using it every day in her life. She lacked the physical strength and stamina to make anything herself, so the actual cooking was done entirely by me, but she gave me instructions in a way that wouldn't have been possible if she hadn't known a recipe.

The "pound cake" that we baked was a fluffy, moist dessert with a refined taste. The

way it seemed to melt in my mouth was unlike any recipe I had ever encountered before. That's right, even in my time cooking for the nobility.

However, the girl who taught the young Miss Freida this recipe is a commoner, the daughter of a soldier and a dyer. She does not live in a situation where she should have easy access to luxury goods like sweets. The only source of sweet things in her diet should be the fruits and berries that she can find in the forest.

Where in the world did she learn this recipe?

After that day, I started experimenting with the pound cake recipe that she'd taught me. I experimented with how much froth I whipped into the batter, how hot I kept the oven, how long I baked it for, and so on. After countless variations, I created what I thought was the ultimate masterpiece, the finest cake I could make with all of my skill. It was so good that even Miss Freida started wondering if this was something that could be sold to the nobility.

She said that she wanted to have Maïne sample it, say how delicious it is, and sell us the rights to it. Maïne has the devouring, she said, and is looking for connections with the nobility. Miss Freida thought that she could offer to introduce Maïne to a noble who would give her favorable conditions in exchange for the rights to the pound cake.

However, despite Miss Freida's scheme, Maïne didn't show her face at all, even as summer grew closer. Miss Freida took drastic measures to bring her here, only to have her refuse the offer with the calm of a girl who didn't actually realize her life was running out.

"Welcome, Maïne," I said. "Glad you could make it. I baked some pound cake today, and I'd love to hear what you think of it."

After taking a bite of the pound cake that I had improved again and again, she offered a plan to improve it further in exchange for a bag of sugar.

"If you grate ferigine peel and add it to the batter, that'll change both the smell and the taste, and it'll still be delicious. You could add other things, too, and those will change the flavor as well. As for what exactly to put in and exactly how much, please do some experimentation on your own. I'll tell you this as a bonus, too: if you're going to bring this out to serve to nobles, then you could thoroughly whip heavy cream and make a fringe around the edge of the cake, then decorate it with fruit to make it look really

extravagant," she said.

Now, I grip my bowl tightly, beating together batter for a pound cake with ferigine peel mixed in. I have no doubt about it: Maïne, who can so immediately spit out ideas for improvements, must know more recipes.

I want them. I want those new recipes.

I want the recipes that Maïne knows.



"Ilse, Ilse! I brought Maïne!"

Miss Freida opens the kitchen door and rushes in with a huge smile on her face. Ever since she'd decided that she was going to be throwing a tasting party, she's been unusually energetic. She's roped the entire family into this and is pulling out all of the stops to make this a success.

Since she had been very weak ever since she was born, when I first started working here I noticed that she spent the majority of her time in her room. Now, though, it's difficult to imagine that the Miss Freida in front of me is the same girl who enjoyed spending all day shut in her enormous room, counting money. She's changed so much, ever since she met Maïne. Now, she's been burning with a desire to become a better merchant than Benno, who has been quickly amassing clout in this town as of late, and lure Maïne over to work for her. Miss Freida, of course, is the kind of girl who drags her entire family into whatever she gets excited about.

"Now then," she says to Maïne, "these are the things you suggested might appeal to kids. What do you think?"

She leads her over to a table in the corner and starts setting out small slices of the cakes that I've made. It seems that she's brought her over today to ask her questions about the tasting party. Maïne glances around the table as she answers the question.

"Well, commoner kids won't be able to afford it, but merchant kids would probably be able to tell how much it's worth, and they'd probably have enough money to actually buy it, right? And if they're around apprentice age, then they should be able to read... Actually, most importantly, when someone grows up, they never forget the kinds of food that they liked when they were kids."

“Ah, I see...” murmurs Freida, writing something on a wooden board.

Freida seems to be taking all this in stride, but this is very strange to me. Maïne, thanks to her devouring, has been slow to mature, so it’s difficult to see her as anything but a very young, unbaptized little girl. Despite that, she’s making some *very* adult comments, isn’t she?

“And then also, when you’re selling the pound cake, instead of selling the entire cake, you could maybe just sell slices. You’d be able to sell those for less, and increase the number of actual sales, I think. You’d get people wanting to share a slice with their sweethearts, or maybe give them to their kids to congratulate them for their baptisms, and so on...”

“I’ve been planning to start by selling these among the nobility,” replies Freida, “as a high-class dessert.”

Miss Freida, who owns monopoly sale rights, wants to price it as high as she possibly can. Maïne wants to lower the price a little so that it can be sold to many more people. Even though these two girls are the same age and trying to sell the same thing, they have two entirely different schools of thought about it.

“I get that you’re trying to get as much as you can out of your monopoly, but these are sweets. I think it’s a better idea to try to make it really popular so you can get a lot of customers...”

“My monopoly lasts for just one year. Why would I want it to be popular after my year is up? I’d prefer to sell it exclusively to the nobility for that year and try to price it as high as I possibly can.”

“Hmm. Well, in that case, if you use seasonal fruits, then you’ll be able to offer new flavors each season. Making little differences like that will keep your regular customers happy.”

Seasonal flavors, she says? My ears immediately pick up on her offhanded remarks. As different seasonal fruits flash across my mind, I cock my head curiously.

“There’s no seasonal fruits in winter, right? What would we use then?”

“Paru is a winter fruit, isn’t it? Also, you could use ‘*rumtopf*’—”

Maïne’s eyes go wide and she snaps her mouth shut mid-sentence. The silence hangs awkwardly in the air, and I raise my eyebrows at her. She glances nervously around the room, then crosses her fingers together in front of her mouth.

“...Any more will cost you.”

From the awkward face she’s making, it seems like she’s finally realized that her mind tends to wander off in a conversation and leaves her to thoughtlessly leak valuable information.

Freida chuckles. “How much might it cost, then? I’ve already set aside quite a bit of money so that I can make sure to pay you for your knowledge.”

Maïne, when paid a price she thinks is fair for her information, often throws in extra knowledge on top of that as a freebie. Miss Freida says that, rather than being stingy with our profits and trying to cheat her, giving her an actually fair price and building a solid, friendly relationship of mutual trust is better for us in the long run. It was a little astonishing to hear her say that, since she’d previously been of the belief that the fundamental nature of merchants was that of deceit.

“Umm, well, what I’m calling *'rumtopf'* is really just a way to pickle fruit in rum. It takes time for it to get tasty enough for that, but by winter you should have something you can use in a pound cake.”

“How does five large silver coins sound for that?”

If it’s just pickling fruit in rum, then the rest is just a matter of trial and error. I start thinking of ways I could still make things work if, in the worst case, negotiations fall through completely, but then Maïne glances at the bag of sugar.

“...Since sugar really isn’t on the market here, then that means that it’ll be hard for anyone else to make or use *'rumtopf'*, isn’t it?”

Looks like this pickling process uses sugar, too. In that case, it’s probably worth asking her. Sugar-based cuisine is still very much in the experimental stages, and nobody has yet to come up with any real recipes. I exchange a glance with Miss Freida, who subtly nods back at me.

“Then perhaps eight small gold coins would suffice?”

“Alright. I’ll tell you how to make and use it. I don’t think there’s any need for a contract, since you’ll basically already have a monopoly until sugar really makes it onto the market, right?”

After they tap their guild cards to finish their transaction, Maïne points out a jar sitting on one of the kitchen shelves.

“We’ll need a jar like that. Do you have a spare?”

“We can use that one,” I say. “There’s nothing in it right now. What else do we need?”

As Maïne starts listing off instructions, I start moving around the kitchen to get everything ready. She says we’ll need to take several lutebelles, a seasonal fruit, wash them thoroughly, cut them up into chunks that are roughly equally-sized, and put them in a bowl. Then, we’ll need to fill the bowl halfway with sugar and let it sit. The sugar, she says, will draw out the moisture from the fruit, so I’ll need to leave it until it looks like the sugar is dissolving.

“Maïne,” I say, “do you know how much sugar costs? Are you sure we really need to be using *all* of this?”

“It’s a preservative,” she says. “If you’re stingy with it, then the fruit will bruise easily and won’t be edible. Also, for the rum, you’re going to want the strongest rum you can find. Otherwise, the fruit will rot.”

I have a feeling that this girl, who trades her recipes and rights away for huge sums of gold, might not actually have a good sense for money. If she knew that sugar was literally worth its weight in silver, would she be using it in huge piles like this?

“Once all the moisture’s been sucked out of the lutebelles, put it in this jar and then add some rum. ...Umm, if any of the fruit isn’t fully covered, then that part’ll get moldy. So then after about ten days, you can add other fruit. I think pyuhl and bralle are in season soon, right? If you put a bunch of summer fruits in there, then you can eat them in winter. Oh! That’s right. This doesn’t work really well with ferigine, I don’t think.”

Miss Freida is quickly writing down all of the important points. I commit everything to memory as well as I stir up the contents of the bowl. I can already see a bit of the moisture being sucked out of the fruit.

“Have you made this?” I ask.

“Yeah. I used the sugar you gave me last time. It’s my first try making it too. So you can use this when making pound cake, or you can maybe use it as a jam substitute too. I also think it would be really tasty in a *‘parfait’* or served with *‘ice cream’*, too...”

Maïne looks like she’s very much looking forward to making all of these things as she

stares, entranced, off into space, a smile on her face as she continues rambling. Miss Freida suddenly startles, looking back at the table.

“Oh no! We’re getting distracted. I brought you here to talk about cake tasting, after all.”

“Ah, yeah, you’re right. So, about that, I kinda want to invite Mister Benno too. Is that okay?”

“*Why*, might I ask?”

A sharp glint enters Miss Freida’s eyes as she looks closely at Maïne. Maïne scratches her cheek, looking off into space as if she’s trying to recall a conversation she’d had with Benno earlier.

“Ummm, well, a tasting like this is rare, isn’t it? He’s interested in seeing what kind of sweets you’re going to be selling, but he’s also interested in just coming to the event itself.”

“...I see. Mister Benno, hm.”

After a moment of pondering, Miss Freida suddenly looks up, eyes gleaming. It seems like she’s just thought of something. She quickly spins around and starts walking towards the kitchen door.

“I have something I must go ask my grandfather. I’ll return shortly. Ilse, please take care of our guest.”

Thanks to the fact that Benno, who she one-sidedly considers to be her rival, will be coming to the party, it seems like Miss Freida’s fire has grown even hotter. Leaving Maïne behind, she walks briskly out of the room, somehow still as elegant as always.

“...She left,” says Maïne.

“She doesn’t usually act like this,” I remark.

“Freida said the same thing about you, actually, back when I told you how you could make your pound cake better.”

She snickers, and I sigh. I thought I’d left my days of being unable to contain myself when faced with a new recipe long behind me, but it seems like I haven’t changed at all.

“Your new recipes are hard,” I say.

“...Urgh. I’m sorry about that.”

“Nothing you need to apologize for,” I say, lightly. “I still want to know them. Now, why don’t you try these? I’d like to hear what you think.”

I line up a slice of the basic cake that she’d taught me how to make, a slice of a cake that I’d added grated ferigine to to change its aroma, a slice where I’d substituted honey for some of the sugar, and a slice with walnuts. Then, I fill a cup with a tea I’d picked to match the cakes and set it in front of her.

“Wow, these all look delicious!” she says, eyes sparkling. Beaming, she starts to taste each cake, cutting neat pieces off of each slice with her fork and slowly lifting them to her mouth. The precision with which she moves her fork and her immaculate posture reminds me of the young noblewomen I’d seen who had had table manners thoroughly drilled into them from a young age. At the very least, her attitude is definitely not one of a common girl who ordinarily never gets to eat sweet things.

She takes a long drink of tea, seeming to enjoy that too, then lets out a long, satisfied sigh.

“I think my favorite out of all of these was the ferigine cake, probably?”

“Why’s that?”

“I really liked how the flavor seemed to fill my mouth.” She takes another gulp of tea. “...Hm, these tea leaves might really work in a cake, too,” she mutters, squinting down into her cup.

“The leaves?” I say. “Wouldn’t that be hard to eat?”

“...Ah!” she says, her hands flying up to cover her mouth. “I’ve said too much.”

It seems like this might be yet more valuable information. I snort, then bring out another full bag of sugar, the same size as I’d given her last time. The table rattles as I set it down heavily.

“I’ll trade you a bag of sugar for the tip,” I say. “I’m only going to get antsy if we just leave it like that. You said you made some of this ‘rumtopf’, so you’re probably running low, aren’t you?”

To be perfectly honest, I hadn’t even imagined that you’d put tea leaves in a desert. Deserts are sweet things. Sugar is extremely expensive, so I’d heard that the current thinking in Central is that you need to highlight its sweetness when you use it. I can’t imagine that adding tea leaves into a cake would make anything sweet at all. Also, I

don't actually have enough time to experiment with all of the different kinds of ways to use all of the different kind of leaves to figure out what she's talking about.

She hums, thinking about it for just a little while. "...For a bag of sugar? Eh, sure. You make tasty things for me to eat." She smiles. "If you grind the leaves into a powder so that you can't taste them individually, then adding tea into the batter can change the aroma of it."

"You mean, this tea?"

I point at the pot that holds the tea leaves I'd served to Maïne, and she gives me an emphatic nod. I stare distrustingly at the pot for a while, then go to fire up the oven. I sit down next to Maïne as she continues to eat her cake and start grinding up tea leaves. I should try this out immediately, I think. I feel bad for neglecting Maïne, my guest, but she gives me a happy smile, saying that she's really just here to taste things and is content to watch me work.

"Say, Maïne. Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"You don't just have good ideas about sweets, do you? I bet you've got some ideas for soup, as well."

"Huh?!"

Maïne freezes, fork in her mouth, and looks up at me with her wide, startled, golden eyes. My hands are currently occupied whipping a bowl full of eggs, so I shrug at her with one shoulder.

"It's something I thought of when I saw what you left behind on your plate back when you stayed with us. You ate everything but the soup, didn't you? I thought at first you just didn't like vegetables, but then you ate pretty much everything else I fed you. You've got another tasty secret in you, don't you, Maïne?"

"...You're very perceptive, Miss Ilse."

She removes the fork from her mouth and gently sets it down on her plate.

"Will you teach me?"

"Ummm... the soup is actually something I'm kinda worried about. If my circumstances change a little, I might find myself having to take care of nobility, even if I don't want to. I'm hoping to keep some secrets to myself so I can have them up my sleeve in case I need them to protect myself."

“Ah, I see.”

She looks so exhausted that I decide not to press her any further, so I just shrug. I worked in a noble house, too, so I know what she’s afraid of: the differences in social stature and the constant danger of being cut down. It’s entirely natural for her to want to hold on to a few trump cards, and she really should.

“Since you’ve got a temporary monopoly on sweets, though, I’d be happy to consult with you about those.”

“Really?!”

I grip the bowl under my arms even more tightly. Maïne flinches back, startled, then nods quickly.

“First off, although I guess this is after you get things going, what’s your plan for when your monopoly on pound cake expires?”

“Is Mister Benno going to be getting in our way?”

Miss Freida always complains about how Lutz and Mister Benno are constantly monopolizing Maïne’s knowledge.

Maïne tilts her head thoughtfully. “Hmmm, I don’t know. I’m sure he’d be mad if I said this, but I don’t think he can? Honestly, I don’t think anything would change if I told him about my dessert recipes.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, Mister Benno’s connections with the nobility are still not very deep, so I don’t think he’d be able to find the ingredients or people with the skills to make them. I don’t think he’s got a path open to him that he could get sugar from, and if he can’t hire people away from the nobility, then he’s not going to find a cook like you, will he? I heard from Freida how the guildmaster hired you.”

I’m halfway dumbfounded to hear Maïne’s frank analysis of Benno, a man who by all reasonable descriptions is practically her guardian. Maïne, in her own way, seems to be thinking about who she should be telling things too. If this is the case, though, then this might be my chance to learn more of her recipes.

I glance up at her as I pour flour into my bowl. “How about you just open up your recipes to the public? I’d be happy to listen.”

“Yeah, if I didn’t know a cook as good as you I wouldn’t be able to make any of these

things just by describing them. I really like how enthusiastic you are about learning, too, so I want to help you out too.”

Her words make me so happy that I have to keep a wordless shout of joy from springing from my throat. What she’s saying, in other words, is that she recognizes my skill. She’s not going to be telling her recipes to Benno, the man she owes so much to, but to me.

“...But, if I just tell them to you, then I don’t make any money off of it, and there’s all sorts of unfairness in that, so I’m in a kinda difficult situation.”

Even if Maïne herself doesn’t find profit to be that important, the world doesn’t agree. Also, her recipes might cause all sorts of chaos in the rest of the world. She probably has ideas for other things besides food, too, things that have no precedent at all.

As I mix melted butter into the bowl, I decide to just ask her the question that’s been on my mind for so long.

“So, Maïne. Who *are* you, really? Where in the world did you learn all these recipes?”

“...Ummm... a dream.”

Without thinking, I shoot her a threatening glare. She must be trying to make fun of me. “...What was that?” I say.

She gives me a troubled sort of smile. “...It’s true. Everything so far has just been me trying to eat things I’ve only ever tasted in a dream.”

She sighs heavily, letting her eyes close halfway as she looks nostalgically off into the distance, smiling sadly. Seeing such a mature expression on her face makes me strangely anxious. She closes her eyes, briefly, then looks up at me, putting on the biggest, most childish grin she can. It’s painfully obvious how fake that smile is.

“But I really do wanna just spread all my recipes eeeverywhere, so I want really good cooks like you to help me make them!”

Sensing that there’s something she deeply doesn’t want to talk about, I go back to stirring my batter, and follow along with where she’s trying to steer the conversation.

“You can’t make them yourself?”

“I mean, I’m weak, and I’m frail, and I don’t have the tools, and I’m not good enough at cooking, so I definitely can’t actually make any of it myself. But if I have good cooks

make them for me, then there's tons of recipes I want to share with the world. I just can't do it right now, though."

She waves her tiny hands around, letting her eyebrows droop pitifully. I glance at her thin, pale arms, recalling how she didn't have the strength to whip eggs or stir flour into a batter. She probably really can't do much cooking with those arms.

"Well, if you ever get a craving for something come see me. I'll be happy to make anything you want, if you show me how to do it."

My heart trembles with the idea of reproducing the recipes Maïne saw in her dreams.

Aaah, I'm looking forward to that! Just what in the world could be hidden in there?

Keeping one eye on Maïne as she keeps eating away at her cake, I pour the batter for my new tea-based pound cake into a pan, then shove it deep into the hot oven.

Chapter 75

Interlude: Pound Cake Tasting Party

My name's Benno. I'm the owner of the Gilberta Company. I'm twenty-nine, and a bachelor.

After a long meeting at the merchants' guild, attended by every shopkeeper who not only owns a store in the city, but owns a big enough one that they have to pay more than the minimum tax, the old asshole that runs the guild looks around the room at each and every one of us before speaking.

"That's it for today, hm? Well then, I'm holding an exhibition in the large conference room for a new kind of dessert that I'm planning on selling soon. Feel free to stop by if you've got the time. I've made sure to have some ready for any attendants you've brought along as well, of course."

I stand up and start heading towards the conference room. The only people here are the owners of large shops. In other words, this is a room full of people who have the money to buy high-class desserts as well as discerning eyes for quality product. If that old bastard had tried throwing a sampling party at his home or at his shop, I don't actually know how many of us would have dragged ourselves all the way out there, so he's hosting it here, right after a meeting, close enough that walking there barely even stretches my legs. I'm almost mad at how well he pulled this off. That old man definitely pays attention.

Pound cake. The dessert that Maïne basically gave away the secret to. On top of that, this tasting party is something that Maïne just offhandedly suggested, which got that shitty old man's granddaughter all fired up.

That absolute idiot just won't stop! She just keeps yanking out product after product after market-destabilizing product! And she doesn't even realize just how much work I have to put in to prevent everything from falling apart! That *thoughtless* little...!

Because one typically wants to have a monopoly on their shop's signature merchandise, people have avoided throwing events like this to widely reveal their new

products before they make it to market. If they wanted to build interest in a product before it reached shelves, they'd try to impress people by advertising whatever amazing inventor actually made the thing. That way, another shopkeeper couldn't just immediately copy the new product before it went up for sale.

What really grinds my gears is that sugar isn't really a thing that's widely circulated around here. Basically the only person who's managed to get any of the sugar that's coming out of Central is the guild master. Worse, since sweet things are "in" right now in the capital, the nobles here are clamoring for desserts. And on top of that, it's pretty obvious that this sampling party isn't just so that the guild master can show off, but so his granddaughter can do so too. That girl has the same nose for coin as her shitty grandfather.

"Welcome to the pound cake sampling party. Please, select the kinds of cake that most suit you, then place these tokens in the corresponding box."

When we enter the conference room, a few young boys and girls, wearing cloths over their faces, are lined up, handing three wooden slips to each of the guests as they walk in.

"You may vote for your favorite three times if you choose, or you may split your votes across three different varieties of cake."

I palm my stack of tokens as I glance around the room. All of the people already circulating through the room have the same cloths draped over their faces, making it easy to immediately tell who's staffing the party and who's a guest. Not many guests have made it here yet, and those that have are still warily looking around the room, so nobody has yet to start reaching for any cake.

"So, this is pound cake, huh..."

On tables in the center of the room, pieces of cake have been neatly arranged, each table containing a different variety of cake. The cake's been cut into bite-sized pieces, but there's more varieties of it than I'd been expecting.

"Oh, Mister Benno!"

"Master Benno, sir!"

The two children waving their hands at me are the ringleader of this fiasco, Maïne, and

my apprentice, Lutz. Lutz is wearing my shop's apprentice uniform, but Maïne's wearing the same clothing as the people running the party. I casually wave at the two of them, beckoning them over, then when Maïne gets within arm's reach I chop her on the head.

"Maïne, what do you think you're doing here?"

"Ow ow ow! I'm just helping out, okay?"

As she rubs her head, asking if it wasn't obvious based on what she's wearing, I reach out and yank off the cloth covering her face.

"Go get changed, now. I don't want any of the merchants that are about to come strolling in here to learn what you look like. Why do you think I'm trying to keep the existence of the paper-inventing, hairpin-making little girl a secret, hm? Are you trying to bring everything down on my shop? Is this some sort of flashy self-promotion, perhaps?"

"Nrgh... I'll go get changed. Lutz, stay here, okay?"

I return her cloth to her, and she quickly heads out of the conference room. Watching her leave, I let out a small sigh. Maïne's unusually clever for a girl her age, and picks up on things very quickly. She knows quite a bit that she ordinarily wouldn't. Despite that, though, she is terrible at paying attention to her surroundings. This is probably pretty normal for a kid, but it's really obvious how little she thinks about how much she stands out and how completely unconcerned she is about how dangerous that might be.

As much as possible, it's best that she doesn't stand out at all. If a kid without any serious backing stands out too much, it doesn't turn out well for them at all. For example, my father died and I inherited his shop just about when I came of age. Everyone looked down on me for being *inexperienced*, and all sorts of awful things happened as a result of that. A kid fresh out of her baptismal ceremony would just be meat to them.

"You are... quite strict with her, sir."

"Lutz, if you want to protect that girl, remember this: without the backing of a merchant, Maïne, who doesn't even have a noble guardian at the temple yet, is in an extremely precarious position."

When I think of how joining the temple will prolong Maïne's life, as well as how it'll let

her form new relationships with the nobility, it's clearly the right decision for her. However, even trying to imagine what might happen if she keeps going on like she has for the last couple of years gives me an amazingly piercing headache.

"Huh, but, aren't you her guardian...?"

"Technically, I am the responsible party for Maïne's Workshop, which allows me to be treated as something *like* her patron, but that's a pretty flimsy connection. If I'd been able to make her my apprentice like I did with you, I'd have more I can do, but it's already been decided that she's joining the temple, and my arms don't yet reach quite that far. Unlike how things are now, even you are going to have a hard time keeping an eye on her. It's best that she doesn't do anything to stand out."

"Mm, I see. You're very right."

"Even if that weren't the case, *that girl* thinks in ways that I just don't understand, and the instant I take my eyes off of her she's gone and done something strange again. So, I think a little strictness is probably in order."

"Aah... that makes quite a bit of sense."

Lutz nods calmly, exactly like Mark does, and I suppress a chuckle. After he was baptized and started working as my apprentice, he very quickly started to change his speech patterns, and started mimicking Mark's posture and mannerisms. I'd bet that Maïne told him to use Mark as a role model at some point.

Lutz's upbringing, which was so completely different from a merchant's kid's, left him pretty lacking in a lot of areas when it comes to being a merchant. He's been frantically trying to cover up all of the ways he's different from the other apprentices. I'm very well aware that he's been studying both me and Mark intently, copying even the tiniest little things from us.

Kid's got ambition. I like that a lot.

"Lutz, what do you think of pound cake? As a commodity?"

"...I think it would undoubtedly sell quite well among the nobility. It'll probably get a really good reception."

"And what are you basing that on? I'm pretty sure you don't know anything about what the nobles' tastes are like or what they usually eat, do you?"

I'd tried to cut deep with that question, but Lutz seems particularly unperturbed as he quickly answers.

“Umm, I heard from Maïne that since Freida is going to be living in the nobles’ quarter, the guild master did everything he could to collect things that the nobility use in their daily lives. This seems to include their cook, who he hired away from a nobleman. That’s why I think that if Freida and that cook are both confident that it’ll sell, then it’ll sell.”

“Hmm, alright then.”

I actually hadn’t heard much about the guild master’s house. I know that he’d put a lot of money into it, but I didn’t know that he’d gathered things to mimic the nobles’ daily lives. My eyes widen a little in amazement at this information. Looks like I can’t underestimate the value of the information that kids might share between themselves.

“Lutz, I’m back!”

“Oh, Maïne!”

Maïne returns, wearing the apprentice’s clothes for my shop. Now, if anyone looks at the three of us, nobody will think anything’s odd at all.

“Master Benno,” says Lutz, pointing at the cake on the far right table, “this is the pound cake with nothing else added to it. This is the kind that I tried before.”

He looks like he’s about to start drooling, maybe because he’s thinking about what it tasted like last time. His eyes are basically glued to the line of cake, glimmering with raw expectation.

“Miss Ilse is really enthusiastic about self-improvement, so she’s made it way better than last time. And then also, the cake on this table has ferigine added to it. This table’s cake has honey in it, and that one has walnuts. The one over there is the latest invention, and it’s got tea leaves added to it. Please, try some!”

She’s puffed out her chest proudly, as if all of this was her own achievement. I snort, looking down at her, somehow entirely unamused.



“And this is because you just *told* them about all of these varieties, didn’t you?”

“Urgh... I, I traded sugar for these, so I wasn’t just giving them ideas for free.”

It seems like she somehow managed to trade that information for some sugar for her own personal use. I’m caught between wanting to praise her shrewdness for actually being a little merchant-like and wanting to smack her on the head for giving them such incredibly valuable information.

“Also, the only ones I told them about were this ferigine one and the tea leaf one. Most of this is because of Miss Ilse’s research, so it’s not like I came up with *all* of this.”

She looks away, pouting, then reaches for a piece of cake.

“You should try this, Mister Benno. It’s good!”

She pops the piece of cake in her mouth and savors the taste. Lutz reaches for his own slice, too. Based on the astonished voices that I’m hearing, it’s pretty obvious that it’s actually good. I take a bite as well.

What is *this*?!

I could tell from the moment I picked it up that it’s soft and fluffy, and when I put it in my mouth it crumbles and almost melts away. It looks like bread at first glance, but no bread I’ve ever seen has been this tender. Bread is something you dip in soup to eat.

I’m also shocked at how I’ve never tasted sweetness like this before. It’s very sweet, but unlike things that have been soaked in honey, it’s not a concentrated, cloying sweetness, nor is it anything like the sweetness of a fruit, but instead a gentle sweetness that spreads all throughout my mouth. That sweetness, mixed with the savory taste of butter, stimulates my appetite and leaves me wanting more.

“It’s tasty, right?”

Maïne looks up at me, eyes glimmering, probably looking for some sort of praise. Honest praise like that just kinda annoys me, so I ignore her, reaching for a piece of the ferigine cake. It’s as light and tender as the first piece, but the aroma of ferigine fills my mouth as well. The taste is refreshing, and it goes down easily. Just by adding a little bit of flavor to it, my impression has changed dramatically. I glance up, looking at the other tables.

“Miss Ilse is really great, isn’t she?”

I brush off Maïne as she talks about how great someone else’s cook is, and move to the next table. I pick up a piece of the honey-laden cake and pop it into my mouth. Unlike the other pieces I’ve eaten so far, this cake is a bit heavier, and the sweetness is much more concentrated. It’s a more familiar taste, and this feels like it’s the sweetest cake out of all of the ones I’ve eaten so far. This’ll probably be the one that’s most popular with kids, who tend to put sweetness above all else.

“It’s sweet, but it’s not too heavy, right?”

The next is the one with walnuts. It’s the most familiar-looking cake of the bunch, since it resembles bread with walnuts in it. However, the texture is entirely unlike the bread that I normally eat. The cake itself is far lighter, giving the impression that the firm nuts are floating in it. The tender cake quickly melts away in my mouth, leaving only the nuts behind. I think this kind of mouth feel would probably be good if I got used to it, but I don’t really like it all that much.

“Hey, Mister Benno. Answer me, please?”

“Shut up. You’re too loud.”

I hush Maïne, who’s been circling restlessly and chirping incessantly at me like the noisiest baby bird, and move on to the final table. The fact that I’m told it has tea leaves in it gives me momentary pause, but when I hesitantly take a bite, the flavor of it really hits me. Unlike the walnuts, the leaves have been thoroughly ground up, so I don’t notice them at all. It definitely tastes like tea, but also like a sweet dessert, which is something entirely new to me. The sweetness isn’t as strong, but it’s still delicious. This, I think, is going to be the most popular with men. At least, it’s my favorite.

“Which are you going to vote for, Mister Benno?”

Every single one of these cakes is an eye-poppingly fantastic delicacy. These are, without a doubt, going to spread like wildfire amongst the nobility. This is the kind of taste that everyone will crave. It would not be an empty exaggeration to say that there’s a huge difference between these and the desserts already on the market.

“Hey, Maïne.”

“What is it, sir?”

“Why’d you give this recipe to the guild master?”

For someone trying to break into noble society, this recipe would have been a massive weapon in my arsenal. I would have wanted this. When I glare down at Maïne, though, she just blinks, tilting her head to the side.

“But I gave it to Miss Ilse, though...”

“That old bastard’s the one selling it. Same thing either way.”

This pound cake is only going to strengthen that shitty old man’s clout amongst the nobles. Maïne frowns, concernedly, looking like she’s maybe picked up on my frustration.

“Mister Benno, you always seem to have a really bad relationship with the guild master, don’t you? Why’s that?”

It suddenly occurs to me that I might not have actually told her that story, but as I think about that, fragments of unpleasant memories flash across my mind.

“When I was growing up, he always had it out for my family’s shop, but when my dad died, that utter asshole tried to get my mom to be his second wife so he could absorb the shop too.”

One day, when my father had gone out travelling to my uncle’s shop to do some business, he was attacked by a thief, who wanted his money, and was killed in the process. Since he was still near the city when this happened, they were able to recover his corpse, but it was cut up so badly that my mother locked herself away for a while after she saw it. And then that old bastard just gleefully waltzed right in on her in the midst of her grief.

“Huh? Th... the guild master wanted her to be his second wife?”

“Yeah. She refused, of course, and then after that he started doing one little thing after another to harass us. It’s still going on now! Remember how much trouble we had getting you registered with the guild? How he tried to find any excuse to reject your application?”

“A~ahh...”

Maïne and Lutz both grimace, remembering the times when they’d gotten tangled up in this mess. That shitty old man doesn’t just hurt me, he goes after everyone around

me, too.

“Now, if you had to constantly deal with the kind of person who’d come up to you right when your lover dies and, with a big smile on his face, introduce you to his daughter, or, worse, constantly try to pawn off his sons, who are much older than me, on your little sisters who haven’t even come of age yet, do you think you’d be able to maintain a nice, friendly relationship?”

If I were to talk about business too, I’d have all sorts of stories about the unreasonable demands he’s piled on me, but Maïne won’t get much meaning out of those kinds of war stories. It’s good enough to just make sure she knows how terrible of a person that old bastard is.

“...Ummm, I guess, depending on your point of view, that means that the Gilberta Company is really highly-valued, isn’t it? I’m not saying that the guild master isn’t causing you trouble with how pushy he’s being, though.”

She avoided replying directly, but it seems that she basically understands how troublesome that guild master is.

“So,” I say, “why did you give that troublesome guild leader your recipe?”

“I mean, if you *really* want to know... all I wanted to really wanted to do was make sweets with Freida, like I’d promised her.”

“But then you made a contract, didn’t you?”

“It’s just a one-year exclusivity agreement, you know? Is that really something to get so mad at me about?”

Putting a time restriction on that contract was remarkably well thought-out for one of Maïne’s deals, but I’m not at all assured that she’ll be able to enforce that. I wonder if Freida’s going to be able to coax her into extending the monopoly deadline indefinitely?

“...So you’re really going to open the recipe to the public after one year?”

“Yes, sir. I don’t want sweets to be monopolized. I want lots of people to be making them!”

Even if she’s saying that she only sold them monopoly rights to the recipe for one year, though, if nobody can actually get their hands on sugar, then the guild master’s shop is probably still going to effectively have a monopoly on it. I’ve got a bad feeling that,

even though I don't want to be left behind more than I already have, there's so many more ways they can pull further ahead.

"Say, you mentioned that you know other recipes, didn't you? You sure you don't want to sell those to me?"

"...Even if I did sell them to you, you wouldn't be able to do anything with them, right? You don't have any sugar or any cooks."

She stares at me blankly, head tilted.

"What do you mean?"

"All of the recipes for sweets that I know require sugar. But, more importantly, the most important thing I need is a really good cook. If they're not as skilled as someone who's worked in a noble house, then even if I told them what the recipe is, they wouldn't immediately be able to recreate it."

"Why a noble house...?"

"Because they need to be able to use an oven whenever they want. I don't think that there's ovens anywhere except bakeries, so they're not really spreading, are they?"

There aren't very many households that have their own personal ovens. Generally, unless you're very rich or a gourmand, there's no real need for one. So, in other words, the guild master's house has an oven, and they also have someone who is capable of using it well.

"Oh my," snickers a child from behind me, "it looks like I might be able to buy all of Maïne's recipes before you can even get all of your things together. Our cook, after all, is always hungry for new recipes."

I turn to look, and see the guild master's daughter, with hair the color of spring flowers gathered into bunches over each of her ears.

"Good afternoon, Mister Benno. Good afternoon, Lutz."

The way her eyes are so full of challenge when she looks up at me is *exactly* like that old bastard. I kept trying to tell myself that if that shitty old man disappeared one day, my life would get a little easier, but I can't underestimate this girl. She's got the same nose for money her grandfather does, the way she's been getting so close to Maïne.

Despite the fact that Maïne has been increasingly vigilant against me, when she sees

Freida, she smiles widely and waves at her, greeting her in a friendly way. I can't help but be a little irritated at just how well they're getting along.

"Freida! How's the party going?"

"Spectacularly, thanks to your help. *Everyone* is loving the pound cake. And, since you've been talking about releasing the recipe in a year's time, there's no small number of people looking forward to that as well!"

How many times do I have to tell this idiot to be more careful until she gets it!

I've managed to trick her a few times, but every single time she unhappily puffs out her cheeks and then still follows through. She doesn't watch out for the kinds of expressions people are making, how much attention they're paying, or even whether or not they're testing her. She lacks so much wariness that I'm actually *concerned*. I'm convinced that the concept of wariness just fell out of her head at some point and she never bothered to go looking for it.

Even still, as an adult watching from the sidelines, there's no way that I can intrude on two little girls having a friendly chat with each other. Unless she makes some sort of promise or gets caught up in something strange, the only thing I can do is stand here with Lutz, glaring at the two of them.

"Lutz," I say. "How can that girl be so friendly with someone who used the fact that she was on her deathbed to swindle her?"

"...I don't think I know how she thinks most of the time. Also, I don't really like Freida all that much."

It's plainly written on his face how much he wants Freida to stay away from Maïne. It's a difficult to tell if the desire to monopolize her that I can see in his green eyes is because she's his most important friend, or if this has already blossomed into romance. Either way, when I see how much Lutz cares for Maïne, I can't help but remember bittersweet memories of my lover from years ago that I'd put aside when she'd died, which leaves me with an itchy, uncomfortable feeling.

"You're in for a rough ride, Lutz," I say.

"Huh?"

"Keeping hold of Maïne isn't going to be an easy task at all."

I rustle his hair as I encourage him. He looks up at me, green eyes gleaming, and nods

slowly.

“Maïne, how’s everything tasting?”

A sturdily-built woman approaches, greeting Maïne as if she knows her from somewhere. A sweet smell rolls off of her body, and she has a cloth covering her face to show that she’s part of the staff. Lutz and I look at her, on our guards, wondering who she is. Maïne, on the other hand, smiles broadly, running over to her.

“It’s amazingly delicious, of course!” says Maïne. “I’d tried a little before, but you’ve made a lot of improvements to the cake with the tea in it! I knew you could do it.”

“Glad to hear it,” says the woman, grinning broadly at Maïne’s praise.

It seems that this woman is the cook who works at the guild master’s house and the person who made this pound cake. I size her up, as any merchant would, studying the cook who was poised to make the guild master a lot of money. She looks back at me.

“Ah, you’re Mister Benno, then?”

“Yeah, I am, and?”

I don’t really understand why the guild master’s cook would be calling to me. Did Maïne do something again? As I scowl, Ilse looks me up and down.

“...Hmm.”

The look in her eyes when she studies me, like she’s trying to figure out who she’s up against, reminds me a lot of the guild master. I narrow my eyes. If I’m going up against a young girl like Freida, her immaturity might cause me to unconsciously hold back, but against an adult, I need exercise no such restraint.

“Ah, so you’re the one who’s trying to tie Maïne up and hog all of her knowledge to herself, are you?”

“Hm? Well, some job I’m doing, then. You’re the one with her pound cake recipe, aren’t you?”

It’s true that I’d like to monopolize whatever information I can, but Maïne refuses to just sit there and let me do it. Ilse describes it as tying her up, but even the stuff that accidentally falls out of Maïne’s mouth has the potential to throw the market into chaos, so, honestly, being careful about parceling out what she knows is for the best.

"I'm generally the one who has to pick up after this kid," I say, "but you've managed to snatch up whatever tasty things she thinks up, haven't you?"

For Maïne's sake, I've gathered all sorts of information, arranged for contract magic in order to strengthen her connection with Lutz, formed a papermaker's association to hide her identity, and done so many other things in the shadows. That thoughtless girl isn't causing the guild master any trouble at all. No, that all falls on me.

"But Mister Benno," says Maïne, pouting, "you're always ripping me off, aren't you?" I flick her forehead. "The money I saved on the rinsham by ripping you off went straight into those two magical contracts, you know?"

"Huh?" she says.

"...Two magical contracts?" says Freida.

The two girls look up at me with the same foolish expression, their mouths hanging open in shock. I shrug.

"Seriously, you don't even know what I go through..."

"I don't particularly care what you're going through," says the cook. "Maïne's said that she's only going to hand her recipes over to people that she thinks can actually make them. You can do whatever you want with whatever else she's got, but her recipes are mine."

This is a declaration of war. It seems like even that old geezer's *staff* have it out for me.

"Hand them over, huh?"

As if I'd let the guild master keep a monopoly on pound cake forever! Over the next year, before that monopoly agreement expires, I need to find a good cook. I can probably get a lead on sugar if I lean on some of my distant relatives, so it'll take some doing but I'll probably manage to get my hands on some of that.

As I continue to glare at Ilse, countless calculations flying about in my head, Maïne tugs urgently on my sleeve, a worried expression on her face.

"Mister Benno, Mister Benno! It'll be really hard to find a cook, you know? If you don't have an intermediary you can use to get in touch with the nobility, then it'll be kinda impossible."

“Why would I need an intermediary? All I’m looking for is someone who can use an oven and is into self-improvement, right?”

All that the whole needing someone good enough to work in a noble house thing boils down to is that I need someone who can get good at using an oven. It’s not like I actually need someone who’s actually, literally worked in a noble house themselves.

“Maïne,” I say, “you know how you keep saying that since there’s no books you’re going to make them yourself? So, what would you do if you didn’t have a cook?”

“I’d... train one myself?”

“Exactly.”

I’ll get the facilities ready, find a good cook from somewhere in this city, and then train them up and get them specialized specifically in making pastries.

“...Let’s give this a shot, hm?”

Chapter 76

Interlude: Master Benno and I

My name is Mark. I am the assistant to Master Benno, the manager of the Gilberta Company. I believe I'm just about thirty-seven years of age, if I recall correctly. When one is as old as I am, one's age isn't something that is clearly remembered.

I have served the Gilberta Company since its previous manager was in charge. If you include my time as an apprentice, they have employed me for thirty years of my life. The year I started apprenticing at this shop as a dalua was the year that Master Benno was born, so the years have passed amazingly quickly.

There are two types of apprenticeships amongst merchants and tradesmen: dalua and dapla. To explain it succinctly, a dalua makes a contract with the shop's manager to simply work at the shop for a fixed term, while a dapla studies towards being able to assist in the management and affairs of the shop itself. There are substantial differences in the contract fees and the contents of the contract themselves, but at this moment there is no need for a thorough explanation.

The Gilberta Company, essentially, employs the children of other shops as dalua. The sons and daughters of merchants spend a certain amount of their lives studying at other shops. The particular duration of this stay is a matter of negotiation between the shop's management and the child's parents. I believe the most common arrangements are between three and four years, perhaps.

The reasons for doing this are manifold. By working at another shop, the child's field of view is widened, they're placed in a position where they are put to work, they're removed from a place where they may be coddled, they make friends with other children who will eventually become the next generation of shopkeepers, and so on, but most importantly they serve as metaphorical bridges built between shops.

My original employment at the Gilberta Company was as a dalua, with the intent that when my contract expired I would return to my family's shop. However, during my employment, my father passed away, and my eldest brother took his place as the shop's manager. His attitudes towards commerce, however, were too different from

my own, so rather than returning to my family's shop, I chose to renew my contract as a dalua several times. Eventually, when I came of age at fifteen years old I signed a contract to become a dapla instead.

The term of apprenticeship for a dapla is eight years. In essence, when a child finishes their apprenticeship as a dalua at another shop, sometime between the ages of ten and twelve, they transition towards becoming a dapla instead. By the time they are twenty years of age, they have become capable of being entrusted with the affairs of the shop in place of the manager.

Since I had begun my apprenticeship as a dapla so late, I spent the first eight years of my adult life in renewed study. Of course, although I may say that it was eight years of study, in truth, I had already worked as a dalua at the shop for eight years, so I was already very much familiar with the operations of the Gilberta Company. Thanks to the good graces of the previous manager, I was not paid an apprentice's wage as would be typical of a dapla, but was instead paid as much as any other adult employee of the shop. Thus, the prospect of eight additional years of study was not at all particularly painful. I was thrilled at how much better my treatment was compared to when I had been a dalua, and I threw myself into my work with zeal.

However, not all remained well. When my period of apprenticeship as a dapla was on the verge of completion, the shop's manager unfortunately passed away. Master Benno, at the time, had only just reached adulthood himself, and there was much concern that he was not yet ready to manage the shop on his own. Of the dalua who had formed a contract with the previous manager, there was no small number who declined to reestablish their contracts under Master Benno.

As my own term of employment had not yet finished, in order to ensure that I could continue to work at the Gilberta Company, I proposed to my family that our own shop could lend their assistance to Master Benno. However, my eldest brother, who was still in charge of the shop, not only refused to offer any support, but went so far as to sneer at the death of the previous manager and sever all ties between my family's shop and the Gilberta Corporation.

I wonder, how I might best describe the anger I felt at that moment? The instant that I swore an oath to myself to say my farewells to my family and remain at the Gilberta Company to support it and its new manager to the bitter end remains exceptionally vivid in my memory, even to this day.

When my term of apprenticeship as dapla to Master Benno ended, he asked me if I would be returning to my family's shop. I, however, had already severed ties with my family and thus had nowhere I could go. Moreover, the shop that needed my efforts the most was still the Gilberta Company. After I expressed this to him, the two of us threw ourselves headlong into the hard work of reviving the company. We quickly returned it to its original state, and shortly thereafter were able to grow it yet larger. The work I did in the shadows to use my own family's shop as a mere stepping stone along the path to the Gilberta Company's resurgence is a story best left untold.

The eldest daughter of the previous manager, Miss Corinna, became married. Master Benno, however, lost all interest in marriage after his lover, Liese, passed away. I as well never married; while I was so absorbed in my work, my marriageable years passed me by without my noticing. Life, it seems, never goes as one might think it would.

Because our work is going so well, and because Master Benno has decided that Miss Corinna's children will inherit the shop, I can now say that our days are free of any problems that might imperil the future of the shop.

Now then; as there is a meeting today which must be attended by the owners of all large shops, Master Benno is currently absent. As such, each of the important matters that need immediate decisions made have been brought to me.

"Mister Mark, the rinsham workshop has contacted us to let us know that their shipment will be delayed," says one employee.

"I see. The shipment of leve they were expecting was delayed as well, so it's only to be expected. Please contact the foreman and ask him to have whatever they have already completed delivered immediately, and to finish the rest of it as soon as they can."

"Um, Mister Mark," says another employee. "We've received a commission request for Miss Corinna from Baron Bron's daughter."

"It's rare for her to commission a garment in the summer. We should hurry, I think. Please deliver that to Miss Corinna immediately."

Some time passes, slightly more busily than usual, after which Master Benno returns to the shop, carrying Maïne in his arms.

"Mark, let's talk. Come!"

He walks quickly towards his office in the back, eyes blazing with determination.

Maïne looks perplexed. Lutz hurries along behind them, out of breath. I suddenly have a bad feeling that I'm about to be handed another unreasonable request.

So far, I've had to procure the materials and ingredients for the rinsham workshop, run around like mad to ensure a market for the rinsham would exist so that I could provide guarantees to the craftsmen, scour the entire town to find the tools and materials that Maïne and Lutz requested as part of their paper-making experiments, aid in the efforts to reduce tension with the parchment makers' association, and effectively do absolutely everything to establish the full-scale workshop for paper production... Now that I think about it, it seems that this last year has seen quite a few unreasonable tasks forced onto me. What might this next thing be now?

"Mark, we're going to train cooks to make desserts! Get ready!"

Train cooks to make desserts? The suggestion that has just flown from his mouth has absolutely nothing to do with any of our business thus far. I have an astoundingly bad feeling about this. There is no doubt: the abruptness of this must have come as the result of something Maïne has done. As for Master Benno, his eyes are glimmering with determination as he digs through stacks of wooden boards, verifying something or other. I am pleased to see him so energetic, but at the same time I feel like this may have terrible impact on those around him.

"When you speak of dessert cooks, what in the world do you plan to have them make?"
"Ask Maïne."

Ah, so this truly is Maïne's doing? It seems that, somehow, another difficult problem has reared its head.

Originally, the Gilberta Company was founded so that Master Benno's great-grandmother, Gilberta, could sell her wares. Essentially, the wife would make her wares at the company workshop, while the husband handled the sales. The husband's name has always been the one registered as the owner of the company, but the true line of ownership has ultimately been matrilineal.

The Gilberta Company's core clientele is the rich people of the city, but the designs that Master Benno's mother came up with attracted the attention of some of the lower-ranked nobility. As such, the company has been able to gain a small amount of influence in noble society. Its ability to do business with the nobility has only come about within the past decade. It is a very recent thing. As Miss Corinna's fashion sense

continues to hold some interest in noble society, the Gilberta Company's position could be said to be very stable.

In other words, the Gilberta Company trades in clothing, accessories, and other such beauty products.

The rinsham that Maïne brought to us is an excellent beauty product that has become very highly valued among our clients, and the hairpins that Miss Corinna's workshop will soon be making have already gathered quite some interest amongst the people of the city. Miss Corinna herself has expressed profound joy over being granted the rights to produce the hairpins, saying that if one were to adjust the quality of the thread and the designs, it is likely that they would be well-received amongst the wives and daughters of the nobility.

However, on the other hand, the plant-based paper that Maïne brought to us caused the Gilberta Company to stray somewhat from its path, and the training of dessert cooks is something entirely different than any of the business that we've been a part of to date. Just what in the world could Master Benno be thinking, I wonder?

"What I'm *trying* to *tell* you," says Maïne, "is that if you don't have any *sugar*, then this entire thing is *pointless*!"

"Even if they don't have any sugar they can still bake bread. That's good practice for using an oven, isn't it?"

"But bread workshops already exist, which means that a bread-maker's association already exists, which means that we're going to have another battle over people's vested interests! Even if it's just practice! And on top of that, weren't you planning on hiring away people who already work at bread workshops, too?!"

"If you're always so concerned about *vested interests*, then how can you ever get anything new off the ground?!"

Master Benno sits in his chair. Across from him, Maïne is on a chair of her own, standing on her knees so that her eye level is the same as his. Watching the two of them go back and forth like this reminds me strongly of how he used to argue with Miss Liese. I wonder if it would be better to describe them as being on too good terms for a quarrel to shake, or as them having such trust in each other to the point where they can have fights like this without caring too much?

It has seemed that, as of late, Master Benno has never been quite so lively as he is when he is fighting with Maïne over matters of business. Perhaps it's because cornering a

skillful speaker like Maïne in an argument gives him the same joy as when he was able to best Miss Liese in one of there quarrels. This, incidentally, did not happen very often.

“Lutz,” I say, “perhaps we should leave those two to their own devices. Could you please describe to me what happened to bring this about? Why did Master Benno suddenly decide that he needed to train cooks to make desserts?”

“Ah, yes,” he replies.

Lutz, who had been staring at the the two of them as they fought, startles, straightens up, and begins to explain to me what had happened. Since he is so used to being thrown around at Maïne’s whims, his mind is remarkably agile at switching to a new focus. He is capable of quietly absorbing any information thrown at him and has a very patient personality. He could be described as someone with talents that are hard to come by. He smoothly recounts the events of the day in an easy-to-understand order, as if he had done this all his life.

According to his explanation, after the meeting at the merchants’ guild, a tasting party was held for pound cake, during which it seems that Master Benno got into a fight with the guild master’s cook. He declared, says Lutz, that if he does not have a cook capable of making sweets, then there’s nothing stopping him from training one himself.

Master Benno does not like to lose, and it seems that in this case he was simply unable to bear it.

“What Maïne was saying,” says Lutz, “is that in order to make desserts, one needs a cook capable of skillfully using an oven. They must also have an enquiring mind and not be afraid to spend a lot of time experimenting with the recipe to make it more delicious. Master Benno was originally thinking that he would be able to find someone who had already mastered the use of ovens at a bread workshop, but Maïne said that since they would wind up making things other than bread, it seems that unless they’re enthusiastic something new, it wouldn’t go particularly well...”

After Lutz finishes explaining the circumstances, I finally start to see the points of compromise that could be reached in the argument between Master Benno and Maïne.

“It seems that Master Benno has determined that these desserts would be suitable for selling to the nobility, then?”

“Yes, but—”

“Lutz, you cannot say ‘but’. When Master Benno is determined to do something, we have no choice but to follow along.”

This may reflect my own particular partiality towards Master Benno, but I believe that he has an excellent sense for matters of business. I cannot recall any instances where he has decided something will sell and, after pursuing that goal with all of his power, failed to make a profit.

I clap my hands together twice, drawing both Master Benno and Maïne’s attention to me.

“Master Benno, when you say that you are going to be training dessert cooks, might I ask how long you believe that would take? Would such an action be profitable?”

He quietly nods. “...Yeah, it’d be profitable. I’m planning on hiring someone who’s already able to use an oven from a bread workshop and using them to teach other people, so that shouldn’t take that much time.”

His eyes are full of self confidence, and his face shows that he’s not seeing even the tiniest sliver of a chance for failure.

“As Maïne has just said that one cannot make her desserts without sugar, you must believe it is possible for you to acquire some, then?”

“It’s been a while since I talked to my relatives, but if I reach out to them, I think I’ll be able to manage something, even if it’ll be a little bit tough. I think Uncle Emil might have a bit of influence in Central? I could also have Otto get in touch with his friends from his trading days. In the meantime, I can have the workers make bread in order to get them used to working with ovens.”

“Hm,” I reply. “it certainly does not seem entirely impossible.”

It seems that because it is impossible to secure victory when there are fundamentally zero chances for success, Master Benno has been considering how he might acquire sugar from the moment Maïne had started talking about desserts.

Arranging for a workshop and purchasing ovens is a tedious and complicated process, but is not exceptionally difficult. It does seem that, after all, the most significant problem that must be dealt with will be negotiating with those businesses that already have vested interest in this field. I dare say that the guild master will likely have objections of his own, as well. Thinking back on all of the strife that had happened with the parchment makers’ association when we wished to start selling plant-based

paper makes my eyes narrow. These disputes that have happened over these things outside of our core business, like making paper or training cooks, are exceedingly difficult compared to the rest of my work.

“Maïne,” I say, “might you have some idea as to how we might avoid strife with the bread makers’ association, similar to the solution you came up with to ensure we did not encroach on the profits of the parchment makers’ association?”

“Huh?! You want me to think that up?!”

Master Benno is a man who prefers to solve his problems by breaking through them with sheer force and fundamentally dislikes compromise. Maïne, who is unskilled at direct conflict and thus avoids them as much as possible, is much more suited to finding a good compromise. Not to mention, the training of dessert cooks is so far out of my area of expertise that I don’t have the background information required to find any points of common ground.

“Of the four of us here, I believe you must be the one most familiar with the topic of dessert cooks, are you not? Because you are thus much more suited than Master Benno to find points of common ground, please, help us determine if there is any view that would allow both parties to still profit.”

I am fully aware that this is an unreasonable demand to be making of a young girl who has only barely just been baptized, but I, along with Master Benno, do not think of Maïne as an ordinary little girl.

“Eh?! Umm... common ground? I mean, you’re, kinda putting me on the spot, but, uh... if you want both sides to profit, umm...”

“Let me see... perhaps there might be some other kind of bread besides the bread being produced now, or something one might use an oven for besides making bread...”

As she broods, I offer her a couple of suggestions, reframing the ideas from her paper compromise so that they might apply to bread. Nothing at all comes to my mind, of course, but since Maïne is a constant font of strange ideas, I believe that there must be something that she will be able to think of.

Confirming my hypothesis, Maïne quickly turns her head to face me, her dark blue hair swinging behind her. Her golden eyes glimmer as she shoots her left hand straight up into the air.

“There *is* something! I’ve really been craving ‘*Italian*’ food!”

“...‘*Italian*’?”

She’s brought out a word I’ve never heard before. Both Master Benno and Lutz tilt their heads, looking at her funnily, but Maïne seems to not care in the slightest as she launches into the topic.

“Even if we don’t have any sugar, then if there’s a style of cooking that uses an oven, then that’s still good practice, right? So if we can make things like ‘*pizza*’, ‘*gratin*’ dishes, or ‘*lasagna*’, then that’ll definitely work. ...Ah! Also, also, you can cook meat in an oven, and also make things like ‘*quiches*’ and ‘*pies*’, too. Aaah, I can’t wait!”

Maïne cheerfully lists off name after name of possible dishes, but based on the fact that she mentioned cooking meat in the oven, I can’t imagine that the rest of them are any sort of dessert. She looks off into the distance, eyes sparkling, looking so entranced by the idea of food that she might start drooling at any moment. Lutz, standing next to me, lets out a small groan.

“Uh oh. She’s going wild again.”

“Oh?” I reply.

“She’s imagining something that she really wants. Once she sets her mind on something, she blazes forward at full speed... I don’t know if Master Benno’s going to be able to win, huh?”

The way he’s groaning makes it easy to understand that Maïne’s rampages often involve forcefully dragging him around to do things. She and Master Benno are very much alike, it seems. Once they have an objective in mind, they blaze directly towards it, perhaps not even realizing the hardships they may cause others around them in the process.

“Mister Benno,” she says, “let’s just give up on desserts. We should make a ‘*restaurant*’... ah, um, a kind of high-class place where you can eat food.”

“Hey, wait! You can’t just declare that we’re giving up like that!”

“Oh, once we get sugar, we can also make ‘*Italian*’ desserts there too. It’s fine! Let’s make ‘*Italian*’.”

“What about that is fine?!”

As Lutz feared, Master Benno appears to be losing. I realize just how similar Lutz and my situations are, with how he is dragged around by Maïne and how I am dragged

around by Master Benno. I shed a tear for him, in my mind.

“Lutz, you must strengthen your heart. Do not let yourself simply be dragged around. You need to learn to predict when she might start to run wild. If you can turn things around before you get dragged into them, your life will be much easier.”

“Mister Mark...?”

“There’s a knack for everything, even getting dragged into things.”

Lutz looks up at me, his green eyes shining with pure admiration. Looking down at him, I silently swear to myself that I will train him to the best of my capabilities so that no matter what unreasonable things he and Maïne find themselves doing, he will be able to bear it fully.

The entire time that the two of us were sharing our moment of appreciation for each others’ hardships, Maïne has not stopped talking. She is currently describing reason after reason as to why establishing an eatery is superior to simply starting a workshop.

“What I’m *saying* is that if you can cook *anything*, not just sweets, then that’s way more marketable, you know? And if you’re offering the food that the workers make for practice to real customers, then not only is the food not going to waste, but the workers themselves will be way more motivated, right? And then if you get to a point where they can start making sweets, then before you start selling them to the nobility, then you can have your customers sample them first, and use their feedback to make it even better!”

As Maïne lists her arguments, with levels of both persuasiveness and expression that one wouldn’t think would come out of the mouth of a child, Lutz looks up at me, eyebrows lowered, looking concerned.

“I... when I hear how passionate she is, I can’t help but start thinking that she might actually be right,” he says.

I hum thoughtfully, nodding. “The ability to make someone want to buy what you’re selling is a much sought-after talent amongst merchants.”

Lutz shrugs, giving me a small smile. “In Maïne’s case though, it’s a talent she doesn’t actually use at all unless it’s for something she wants.”

“Take care to watch how she says things to convince others of what she’s saying. Remember, everything around you can be an example to learn from.”

The persuasive power to make your opponent believe what you do is a very attractive ability, but ultimately, if Lutz is to manage a shop in the future, he cannot live a life of merely being dragged along by Maïne's zeal.

"All that aside, Lutz. Is Maïne all right? I can't help but wonder if she might be a little *too* zealous..."

"Aah! Maïne! Calm down a little!"

As soon as he says that, Maïne stops talking, and flops over onto the table, resting her head on its surface. It seems that she really has overdone it. Even still, it seems that she has yet more to say. While laying on the top, she starts mumbling, continuing her previous thought.

"There's a huge difference between what rich people eat and what the nobility eat, you know. If you can provide tasty food, I think that people will absolutely come to eat it, even if it's a little pricey. Definitely."

"A huge difference? Where in the world would you have learned about what nobles eat... the guild master, huh?"

"See? You're interested too, aren't you?" She chuckles gleefully. "They're *really* different. But, you still have a chance. I've still got plenty of information that I haven't given over to Miss Ilse yet, after all."

I can tell that her words have swayed Master Benno significantly, but at this point, he should not be making any firm decisions. He needs to step back, calm down, and go over Maïne's proposal with careful, deliberate thought. If there are so many points in this plan's favor, then there must be points against it as well.

"As you say," I interject, "we must carefully consider whether or not we truly need to train workers to be able to make desserts. Maïne, thank you very much for this wonderful suggestion. It is an enormous help. Won't you return home and take care of your own needs, though? You must be quite tired after pushing Master Benno around like that."

"Oooh, Mister Mark," she says, still slumped over the table, "your kindness always goes straight to my heart."

I instruct Lutz to ensure that Maïne makes it home safely, then see the two of them out of the shop. After I see them off, I return to the back office, to find Master Benno slumped over like Maïne was just a moment ago, his face buried in a pile of documents.

“Master Benno?”

“Seriously. That girl’s just full of surprises, isn’t she.”

“You are very right. I did not expect in the slightest that her plan to avoid friction with the bread makers’ association would have turned into *that*.”

Master Benno scratches his head, rustling his hair, as he slowly sits upright. He looks at me, a sharp glint in his reddish-brown eyes.

“...What do you think, Mark?”

“I do believe that it would be easier to establish an eatery than it would be to train workers to make desserts. With an eatery, we don’t risk starting any conflicts with the bread makers’ association. Instead, we would have to consider how we would deal with the food vendors’ association, but if we properly follow the processes in place, I do not think that the act of establishing the shop itself would be particularly difficult.”

“Agreed.”

Maïne’s proposal is for a high-class place to eat. A shop such as that should not disturb the much cheaper vendors that operate in the town marketplace, so I am comfortable considering that the food vendors’ association will not put forth any significant opposition.

“An eatery isn’t a bad idea. A lot of rich people already employ cooking girls, but those girls are, fundamentally, commoners. So, even if you throw a lot of money at them, all that’ll happen is that you’ll be able to eat a lot of food. The actual food itself isn’t going to change all that much. The food the nobility eat uses recipes that can’t be made unless you have a very good cook working in a noble house, so everything of course tastes different, and there’s a difference in variety. Even if it’s somewhat expensive, considering the subject matter and the flavors involved, I believe a such a shop might be successful.”

I have never myself had the opportunity to eat the food of noblemen, so I do not have a clear understanding of what’s at play here. Master Benno, however, has eaten it a number of times that could be counted on one hand, as a result of being invited to a meal by a nobleman on several occasions. If Master Benno says so, then I have no doubt that there are significant differences between the food that the nobility eat and the food that merely very wealthy people eat.

“However, how does Maïne know recipes for noble food? That girl’s only been at the guild master’s house for a few days total. Why does she know so many different

varieties of recipes? How can she just *produce* recipes that require an oven off the top of her head?"

"Because she is Maïne, sir."

I sigh as I answer his question. He seems dissatisfied by my answer, but I have no better explanation to give.

"Mark, you just—"

"It's pointless to waste time thinking on questions we cannot answer. Weren't you the one who said that it doesn't matter who she was as long as she was useful to us merchants, back when she sold us the rinsham? Even after all this time, we've learned nothing new. It's a far better use of our time to instead think of ways to ensure that we do not let her precious information leak out to anyone else."

I shrug my shoulders and shake my head. Benno glances away, as if he felt bad about something, then claps his hands, awkwardly and abruptly changing the topic of conversation.

"Ah, well, sure, but... I've been thinking of adopting Lutz. What do you think, Mark?"

"It would seem that Maïne is having quite the influence on you, sir, if you are blurting out ideas that you haven't actually thought through."

"Huuhhh? Well *that's* rude! Don't lump me in with that thoughtless little kid!"

No matter how threateningly he shouts at me, I can't imagine this idea of adopting Lutz to be anything but thoughtless. If it isn't, what in the world could he possibly be thinking? If Master Benno, the manager of a shop, is seeking an adoptive son, perhaps he is looking to find an heir amongst the people around him. This would be troublesome for him to do so, however, as it would sow the seeds of strife with Miss Corinna, who has yet to bear a child.

"Well then, if you truly have a reason as to why you would propose something that would cause such great discord between you and Miss Corinna, would you perhaps explain your careful thinking?"

He sighs. "You're just going to pick this apart, aren't you," he grumbles, before explaining why he wants to adopt Lutz.

"First, if we want to keep our connections with Maïne, we absolutely need to secure Lutz. You're with me so far, right?"

“You’re quite right.”

I already am aware that, because of the magical contract that stipulates that the things Maine’s Workshop produces will be sold through Lutz, keeping hold of him is very much necessary. Additionally, as Lutz is currently employed as a dalua, when his period of employment is over, if he were to have the inclination to go to somebody else’s shop, he would be entirely capable of doing so. It would seem that preventing this from happening is Master Benno’s objective.

“I was thinking I could hire him on as a dapla, but I’ve been thinking that if I want someone that I can definitely trust with the shop, then maybe adopting him to carve out a more solid position would be a better idea.”

“Wouldn’t hiring him as a dapla be enough, in that case? If you truly need someone you can definitely trust, then when Miss Corinna gives birth to a daughter, would you not be able to have them marry?”

Rather than raising him as an adopted son, giving him a thorough education as a dapla, then having him marry into the family would cause far less strife, I believe. Master Benno, however, merely shrugs, waving his hand dismissively.

“That’s not going to work with Lutz. He’s only got eyes for Maïne. Either way, Lutz’s original dream was to become a trader. He’s been looking for a chance to leave the city. And that’s even more reason why I think that tying him down to this shop is going to be really difficult.”

“...A trader, you say? That’s...”

This is quite surprising. It’s very rare for someone born and raised in a city to dream of becoming a trader.

Benno shrugs his shoulders, quirking up the corners of his mouth. “I’ve been thinking that the main reason for that was because his life at home was so constrained, but honestly, if he didn’t have Maïne tying him down, there’d be nothing keeping him here. There’s no doubt about how Maïne’s going to be swallowed up by the nobility in the near future. I don’t know if it’s going to be the nobility in this city, or if she’s going to get tangled up with some other city’s nobility, or even get called all the way out to Central, but... I don’t know just what the odds are, but there’s a good chance that she’s going to leave this city at some point or another.”

Lutz is currently an apprentice under Master Benno’s patronage, and he has neither

knowledge nor anything else that he can use. However, by the time he comes of age, he will have learned quite a lot, and most likely come to realize his own worth. If by this point Maïne has been removed from the city and their magical contract rendered meaningless, it's entirely possible that he might leave for a shop in another city.



“When Maïne leaves this city, I want to be in a position to follow her with Lutz in tow.” My eyes narrow slightly. “Why would you go that far, sir?” He gives me a slightly troubled smile. “The actual successor to the Gilberta Company is Corinna. I’m just a middleman. Maïne says she wants to make books, but that’s not what this shop does. This isn’t going to be anytime soon, but I’m thinking that maybe I what I really want is to leave the shop to Corinna and Otto and build my own, separate shop.”

Ownership of the Gilberta Company is in fact matrilineal, so he is correct: the ones to which the shop should be entrusted are Corinna and Otto. However, I can’t quite make the connection between his desire for independence and his intentions for Lutz. As I look at him curiously, he sighs. “Mark can keep a secret,” he mutters to himself, and a nostalgic smile floats across his face.

“Lately, when I’ve been watching Maïne and Lutz, I’ve been remembering how I used to be. When my dad was still alive, when I didn’t have anything to worry about in my life... like how I used to be when I was together with Liese.”

The way Lutz and Maïne interact with each other is very reminiscent of the way Miss Liese and Master Benno used to laugh together. I can understand, somewhat, what he is feeling. I can almost see, in the corner of my eye, images of the two of them playing grown-up in the back of the shop or sneakily planning some sort of mischief.

“Looking at those two made me remember. I had a dream, once, before my dad died and I put all of my efforts to keeping this shop and my family safe...” “Ah yes, your dream of becoming a merchant respected around the whole world.”

As soon as I say that, Master Benno’s eyes go wide, falling into such a state of disarray that he appears, quite frankly, amusing.

He points accusingly at me. “Wh... why do you remember that?!” “Because it was *your* dream, sir.”

I do not want this to be taken lightly. I have known Master Benno ever since he was born. As I puff my chest out with pride, he clutches his head, moaning. He is quite terrible at dealing with people who know all of the little details about his childish past. I’m very aware of this. After a moment of continuing to hold his head and grumble, he clears his throat, as to free himself from his momentary embarrassment.

“If I can keep implementing every one of the things that Maïne’s got in her head, I can actually achieve that dream, can’t I?”

“...This may sound pretentious, but if you indeed can realize everything that Maïne describes, then you truly will gain the respect of the world.”

“So, to start, I’m going to go to the cities my brothers and sisters are in, get paper-making workshops set up there, and start trying to distribute this vegetable-based paper. ...Mark, what will you do?”

He looks up at me, head tilted slightly to the side, leaning back in his chair with his fingers laced together in front of him. Seeing him stare at me, waiting for an answer, almost makes me laugh out loud. After all, when the shop’s previous manager had died, my educational period had ended, and he’d asked me whether or not I would be leaving the shop, he’d worn exactly the same expression on his face.

“I think that Theo might be much better at dealing with Mister Otto than I would be. I’ll come with you. After all, Lutz will need training, won’t he?”

“...Alright then.”

Seeing him sigh in relief brings a nostalgic smile to my face.

Master Benno had forgotten his dream, replacing it with a stubborn desire to protect his family and his shop. Maïne is pushing him into motion, making him form a paper makers’ association, making him get ready to start even more new ventures. Just like Otto had said before, Maïne, to Master Benno, is the goddess of water, bringing about the end of a long, long winter.

And thanks to her, I have remembered my own dreams as well.

If Maïne is his goddess of water, than I want to be, now more than ever, his god of fire, helping him grow and flourish.

Chapter 77

Interlude: A Gatekeeper's Job

I'm Gunther. I'm thirty-two years old, and today I'm standing watch at the south gates to protect my beloved family.

Otto is being extra annoying today. He just can't stop himself from constantly grinning, and he isn't actually doing his job at all. My guess is that something good's happened to his wife, who he just adores. I get it, sure, but that face he's making is just begging for a couple good punches.

"Get yourself together, Otto. Is that the kind of face a gatekeeper makes?!"
"I *am* keeping myself together!"

When I call him out on it, he smacks himself in the cheeks, making an effort to shape up, but he barely manages anything. His cheeks are a little redder, but he can't keep a straight face at all. As I sigh in astonishment, I hear a low chuckle behind me. I turn around and see my commanding officer, shoulders quivering with laughter.

"Your subordinate's just like you, isn't he?" he says. "He's paying exactly as much attention to his job as you do when you're worried about your daughters."
"Ah...?! Uh, no, sir, what I—"
He claps me on my shoulder. "Have a talk with him," he says, sauntering off. "He always does it for you."

Back when I had to miss Tuuli's baptismal ceremony, and whenever Maïne's in trouble, Otto's always been there to listen to me, so I guess I owe him one.

Gotta do it, then. It's not gonna be great, but maybe I should go keep him company after work. ...Although, whenever he really gets started talking about things he loves, he gets completely unstoppable.

I sigh again. Learning that *that's* what people think of me was pretty unexpected, and I really had no way of knowing that everyone wanted us two irritatingly doting family men to be friends with each other, either.



After we hand over our posts to the night shift, Otto and I start walking towards the eastern gates. The eastern gates are connected to the main highway, so it gets the most pedestrian traffic, and the road that connects to them is lined with inns and eateries. The side streets and alleys off the main road are packed with shops too, and these are the ones that the people who actually live here tend to use.

Since it's the summer, every single shop has its doors flung wide open, and here and there I can hear the rowdy voices of people enjoying a drink or four. We make our way towards a bar that's a favorite among the soldiers here, taking care to avoid bumping into anyone else along the way.

The bar is full of the smell of food and drink. When we walk in, the two medium-length tables in the middle of the room are full of a party of about ten or so people having a loud conversation about something or other. The handful of smaller, round tables around the edge of the room that are meant for a few people are also almost all full up.

"It's really busy," remarks Otto.

"C'mon, over there," I say.

I head towards the back of the room, cutting my way through the noisy party in the middle. On my way, I call out to the manager standing behind the counter.

"Hey, Ebbo! Two bereas this way. And some boiled sausage too, when you get the chance." "Comin' up!"

I put in an order for two bereas from Ebbo, the manager. To someone like me, who's been a gatekeeper ever since his apprentice days, basically everyone in this little city's an acquaintance, except for the nobles and rich people that keep the curtains closed on their carriages.

I slap down a large copper coin on the counter to pay for the drinks and the sausage, and Ebbo sets out two large wooden mugs, filled to the brim with berea. I grab the mugs, careful not to spill anything, look around the room for an empty spot, and start moving towards a round table near the back of the bar.

The table's still got all the tableware on it from the previous customers, but when the

two of us start heading for it a sharp-eyed serving girl quickly runs over to clear off the wooden cups and forks. There's a piece of the bread that they serve meat on instead of plates left on the table, already damp with juice. She uses it to roughly wipe down the table, then tosses it to the ground. The shop dog runs over, tail wagging, and hungrily scarfs it down. Otto and I set our mugs down on the freshly cleared table and sit down, our chairs clattering against the wooden floor.

"We give thanks to Vantolle," we both say, lifting our mugs in gratitude to the god of alcohol, and take a drink.

I down my entire mug in one go, gulping noisily. In my opinion, this is the absolute best way to enjoy a frothy mug of berea. The feeling of the drink pouring down my throat after it's gotten so parched from work is irresistible. The sensation of the tiny little bubbles and that special bitter flavor hit my mouth an instant later.

I let out a satisfied sigh. "That's the stuff! ...So, what's happened?"

I set my empty mug down on the table with a clack. Otto, who still has some froth around his mouth, takes a plate of boiled sausage from the serving girl and orders us another round. As I reach for the chunk of hard bread they served my sausage on, Otto starts acting absolutely lovestruck, foppishly shrugging his shoulders.

"Welllll, Corinna says we're still not telling anyone yet, so even if it's you, sir, I just can't say!"

"What, you're having a kid or something?"

"H, how, how did you know that?!"

"I mean, based on how you're acting and the fact that your wife doesn't want you to tell anyone, what else could it be?"

Otto gives up, scratching his cheek. To be a little more honest, I figured it out after going through the exact same thing and having someone point it out the same way. No need to tell him that, though.

Seriously, though, Otto's going to be a dad, huh? Is this merry man really going to be okay?

Those words flicker through my head, but even that was something that people asked about me back then, too.

Yeah, if he's so happy about having a child now, then he'll probably be a good, doting father. Based on my own past, I'd bet there'll be no problems there at all.

"Alright, here're your refills! Thanks for waiting."

The serving girl sets down fresh mugs with a heavy clack, their contents sloshing a little and sending a spray of foam over the sides. Neither she nor us customers pays it any mind, though, and I hand her a medium copper coin. Otto and I drink our drinks, distracted by the hubbub around us. Unlike my first mug, I don't slam it back in one go, but instead let the complex flavor roll across my tongue, tasting the bitterness of the wheat mixed with the sweetness of the malt, before finally swallowing it down.

Come to think of it, wasn't Otto's wife the seamstress that Eva and Tuuli admire? Tuuli was saying that after her darua contract runs out at her current workshop, she was going to try really hard to move to Otto's wife's workshop next. Also, her older brother's the proprietor of that company that's been taking care of Maïne. I myself only really know Otto, but it seems like our families have somehow managed to get pretty close.

"Otto, make sure you do right by your wife and kid. Your kid's going to be the heir to a major store, isn't he? Maïne was saying something about that."

"...About that, sir."

His entire demeanor suddenly changes. His face hardens, his foppish demeanor disappearing, and he looks off into space as if he's searching for words. When I see his shoulders tense, just like Maïne's did when she was trying to tell us something she'd been bottling up, my head suddenly cools, the buzz of the alcohol disappearing. Despite the fact that I'd just taken a swig, my throat suddenly feels dry. I take a long, slow drink of my berea.

"...Alright, what is it?"

"Ah~... well, this isn't an immediate thing, but... in a few years, I'm probably going to quit being a soldier."

The reason Otto had become a soldier was originally so that he could try to marry the heiress of a major store. A mere trader falling in love with the heiress of a major store. Basically everything about being a trader is different from being a merchant in a city. There's no way a trader could suddenly become a merchant working for a major store. At that point, the people around her were saying that he was only courting her in order

to gain the social standing of a major merchant, so she treated him with a lot of suspicion at first. However, when Otto bought his citizenship and found work as a soldier, not a merchant, it showed her how serious his feelings were.

That was a major shock, though, when I heard about it. That happened when I was still stationed at the west gate, so that must have been, what, four years ago? One day, a particular trader, who'd always said that he was selling his wares so he could go home to his parents one day and open a shop in the city they lived in, came through the gates as usual. A few days later, that same trader shows back up again at the gates, saying that in order to woo a woman he'd sold everything he owned to buy a citizenship and was now looking for non-mercantile work. The other gatekeepers had to ask him to repeat himself several times, not believing their own ears.

I'd known Otto since he was a kid, though, all the way back from when his father kept bringing him along his journeys as a trader. It was easy to understand that if a man like him who said that he was going to go back to his parents someday suddenly sold everything to buy citizenship, he must have seriously fallen in love at first sight.

Thanks to his life as a trader, Otto knew his numbers, could read our official documents, and was decently good with his hands. In the end, I'd recommended him to the higher-ups in the guard, on the condition that he was mostly going to be doing paperwork. There are many soldiers who, no matter how diligent they are about training, constantly forget to do their paperwork. Otto joining the soldiery made dealing with the merchants and nobility coming through the gates with their letters of recommendation a lot easier on us all.

But now he's quitting being a soldier? Does this mean that his wife's family has recognized him as a merchant?

I've known for a while that when he's not on duty at the gates, he's been helping out with things at his wife's shop. I also know that he's been making sure to keep his mercantile senses sharp by talking with the traders and merchants that come through the gates. If this is the result of all of his hard work paying off, then I'm really happy for him, but there's something in his face that reminds me of a man who's lost his bearings.

"So now that you're having a kid, is that dutiful older brother of Corinna's finally recognizing you?"

"...No, we've occasionally had conversations about that before, so that's probably not

it. I think this is because of Maïne.”

“What?!”

I slam my cup down, eyes nearly flying out of my head. I hadn’t expected that my daughter’s name would come up at all. Otto, however, looks a little more relaxed, reaching for his cup and taking a drink.

“Sir, when I was looking for work outside of being a merchant, the reason I thought being a soldier was the best choice for me was so that I could make acquaintances with the people living in this city. I wanted to make sure that I could remember everyone’s faces, and that they’d all remember mine. Also, I wanted to be able to know about all the merchants and nobles coming and going, so I decided that being a soldier would be a good way to gather a little intelligence.”

“Hmm,” I say, noncommittally.

“I’d planned to keep being a soldier for a while longer, but things around the store have started changing. The rinsham and hairpins that Maïne brought us have been extremely good products for us, so the Gilberta Company’s been achieving great things lately.”

“Huh, because of the products Maïne brought you?”

I’m happy that Maïne’s being praised, and as a parent I’m pretty proud about that, but something feels a bit off about all that. From where I’m standing, rinsham is something that Tuuli made, and the hairpins that Eva and Tuuli made were much prettier than Maïne’s. When Maïne tries to make things, she doesn’t have enough strength to do it, so she winds up making a whole lot of mistakes. I can’t even count all of the times I’ve seen her look at something that hasn’t turned out quite right with her head tilted to the side in confusion.

“But the Gilberta Company’s main business is in clothing and accessories, so when she and Lutz made a vegetable-based paper and brought that to us... it’s very profitable and influential, but it doesn’t fit the direction of our store. Benno wants to expand the scope of what we sell. Corinna, though, really doesn’t have any interest in anything but clothing, so she’s been saying that she doesn’t want to do any expansion.”

I frown. “Are you telling me that Maïne bringing you things has been causing conflict?” Otto frantically waves his hand back and forth. “Oh no no no, I wouldn’t call it conflict at all. From a merchant’s standpoint, all those things are amazing. I totally understand why Benno wants to get involved. It’s just that Corinna doesn’t want to sell them. That’s why Benno’s thinking that he wants to hand over the Gilberta Company to Corinna earlier than we’d planned, get me to help, and own his own shop... He’s going

to start a new shop in order to sell the things that Maïne comes up with to other cities.”

If the proprietor of a major store is going all the way as to start a new store, then selling and distributing these products must be generating colossal sums of money. A little while ago, an extremely excited Tuuli had been trying very hard to explain to me that Maïne was actually extremely rich, but I figured, reasonably, that she was just exaggerating. There’s no way that a girl just barely out of her baptism would have any real amount of money.

“...So it’s true, then, that Maïne’s been earning a ridiculous amount of money?”

“It really is. But, she’s been extremely careful about controlling her finances. Maybe someone taught her about that, because she’s far better at it than you’d expect a kid to be. I don’t think *you’d* have managed to teach her how to calculate transactions at that level, sir, so where in the world did she learn it?”

He grins teasingly at me. I stare back at him for a moment, then snort. There’s only one being that could have taken notice of my cute little girl, filled her to overflowing with mana, and gifted her with knowledge beyond understanding.

“The gods taught it to her. My daughter is beloved by the gods, after all.”

“I kept thinking you were just exaggerating like a normal father, but it’s kinda scary how persuasive that idea is now.”

Otto laughs, shrugging his shoulders, then takes a big bite of his sausage. I take a bite of my own, then turn the conversation back to him.

“So, when are you planning on quitting? We don’t have anyone able to take over for your work, you know?”

“Oh, yes, there’s no way that I’d be able to hand off my post anytime soon, so I was thinking that it would be sometime in the next two to three years. I’ve been thinking I want to train up someone to be good at calculations, though.” He sighs. “Ahh... Maïne getting caught by the temple was a miscalculation on my part.”

I recall that Otto had advised Maïne to not become a merchant’s apprentice, trying to convince her that both her physical weakness and the strain she’d put on human relationships meant that it would be better for her to work out of her home. What she decided back then was that she was going to work at home, sometimes come along with me to the gates to do some work there, and keep living like that for as long as she could, wasn’t it? I don’t think anyone was thinking that she might get caught up by the

temple.

“It was a miscalculation for me too, I guess. Maïne had been saying that she didn’t want to make any noble’s acquaintance, then suddenly she started saying she wanted to go apprentice as a priestess. Just to read books whenever she wanted, huh, that girl...”

Just remembering the time when she’d told me that she wanted to go to the temple and be a priestess makes my grip tighten painfully on the mug.

“It seems like Benno had been gathering information and trying to pull some strings, but... Sir, are you happy with the way things turned out?”

“Do you *think* I am?” I say, shooting him a sharp look.

He raises his hands in defeat, shaking his head. “No, not at all.”

No matter how many good conditions we got, Maïne attending the temple isn’t anything I would have picked by choice.

“I don’t think I possibly could be happy about that,” I say. “They’re promising that she’s going to be treated the same way that the nobles are, but once you start thinking about those guys’ sense of privilege, there’s no way that that’s actually going to wind up happening.”

“...Yes, exactly.”

It’s just lip service. Sure, to make it look good, they’ll probably give her some blue robs, but I know for a fact that they’re not going to treat her the same as a noble in any meaningful way.

“Although, we did manage to avoid getting her thrown in the orphanage. If she can come home, then I still get to see her. Those guys are nobles. Even if all we got out of this was that she didn’t get completely snatched away by them, then that’s still a win in my book.”

“It’s a very precarious position, though.”

“...Yeah.”

Maïne’s magic had gone berserk, coercing the temple master into backing down, so things are somewhat hazy right now, but he was originally planning on sentencing me and Eva to death and throwing Maïne into the orphanage. She saved our lives, and we won her the ability to live at home, but that was an enormous concession on the temple’s part. Wishing for any better treatment than that is futile. Rather, the temple

master is going to be livid that he was coerced by a mere commoner, and is absolutely going to treat her terribly. Just thinking of what might happen once she starts going to the temple fills me with dread.

“Sir. This is second-hand information, but according to Benno, Maïne has at most five years of relative peace at the temple. Since there aren’t that many nobles around right now, people that have mana are very important, but once their numbers start to increase then there’s a very real danger that they’re going to treat her as a burden.”
“...Just five years, huh? It’s still better than the alternative, though. If she doesn’t go to the temple, then it won’t even be half a year from now before she dies.”

I’m letting Maïne go to the temple for the sake of prolonging her life. That is all I can do for her. If I had magic tools, I could do it myself, but I don’t have either the connections or the money to be able to get any. I’m too worthless as a father.

“If she can’t go to the temple, then making a contract with a nobleman would be fine, too. She has a lot of value: she has mana, and she can make money. If she can demonstrate how valuable she is before things start getting dangerous, then there’s a good chance that she’ll be able to secure better conditions on the contract than just being kept alive.”

“Maïne said that she wanted to stay with her family, so she didn’t want a contract with a noble, but... as her father, I think I’d prefer her to keep living.”

She suffered with her fever for so long, but now that she’s finally able to do the things that she wants to be able to do, I want her to live for the sake of her dreams. But, does her wish to live extend all the way to making a contract with a noble? What kind of noble would she contract with, and what conditions would she be able to get on that contract? Everything is all up to Maïne.

I’m her father, yet there’s so little I can do. Benno consulted with his relatives to gather all sorts of information for her. The guild master sold her one of the magical tools he’d gathered for his own granddaughter’s sake. I can’t help but wonder if they’ve done so much more for her than I ever could.

“...Just what can I do for her, as her father? I don’t have money, I don’t have connections. No matter how important she is to me, in the end, I’m just a soldier that can’t even protect his own daughter, aren’t I? I’m just a bad joke.”

I let the alcohol do its work, letting out the feelings I can’t ever let out at home. I’ve

been so self-importantly declaring that I'd protect all of the families of this town, when there's nothing I can really even do for them.

Otto slowly tilts his head doubtfully to one side as he listens to me grumble.

"No, I'd say that you, the soldier who guards the gates to this city, are the gods' baton of command."

I narrow my eyes. "...What do you mean by that?"

Otto glances around the room, which still roils with noisy activity, then leans a little closer, lowering his voice.

"Thanks to Benno's assistance, Maïne is more-or-less well-protected within the city by a magical contract. At the very least, there's plenty of people here in the city who want to keep Maïne safe. Out of all of Benno's predictions, though, the one that we should be most scared of is the possibility that Maïne might be kidnapped by a noble from somewhere else."

I gulp. "What happens if she's kidnapped?"

I've been mostly assuming that the danger was going to come from the nobles in the temple. I hadn't even considered that nobles from other parts of the country might have their eyes on her too.

"If she leaves the city, she'll be cut off from the contract magic's effects. If nobles from this city do anything, and someone like the guild master or Benno decide to do something about it, then they might be able to appeal to the lord of the city to investigate the matter. However, if the nobles are from another city, then there's a possibility that they'd be out of the lord's reach."

Benno is the proprietor of a major shop, and it's plain to see that he has a lot of political power. Hearing that someone like him, or the master of the merchant's guild, or even the lord of the city himself have limits to where they can actually exercise that power hits me like a blow to the head.

If the lord of the city can't do something, then how could I possibly do it either? How in the world do I deal with nobles from another city?

I squeeze my forehead tightly, fingers digging into my temples. Otto, though, gives me a broad, challenging grin.

“If we don’t want that to happen, then we’re going to want to find out this of the priests in the temple has ill feelings towards Maïne and do some investigation into what nobles those people might have relationships with. Also, we’ll need to keep an eye out for any nobles from other places who come to the city, then decide if they’re trouble or not. Since that’s the case, then wouldn’t you think that the gatekeeper’s job of reading every single letter of introduction and written invitation that people bring with them is, in fact, a very suitable job for keeping Maïne safe?”

I blink several times, thinking back on what a gatekeeper’s job is. He’s right in that if you want to know about the movement of the nobility, being a gatekeeper is an excellent way to do so. No noble from other cities ever comes through our gates without either a letter of introduction or a written invitation. Whether by horse or carriage, nobles who enter the city always pass through the gates, then based on their letter of introduction, head straight to the inner ramparts and enter the nobles’ quarter. Distinguished noblemen never ordinarily wander around the districts where us commoners live. If we’re alert for any noble stopping their carriages in the city or heading straight for the temple, then there’s a good chance that we’d be able to head off any kidnapping attempt.

Even if, for example, a nobleman were to hire some thug to do the kidnapping for her, any gatekeeper on duty would instantly recognize them as a stranger. We can pretty easily spot anyone who makes their living doing shady business, too. If I talk to the people here as I make my rounds, asking them if they’ve seen anything suspicious, and get closer to my fellow guards, then I could, just by my every day actions, put myself in a position where I can find out very quickly if something strange is going on. This is entirely part of my job as a soldier.

“Sir, weren’t you the one who said that you became a soldier to protect all the families of the city? Maïne counts. I think that if you just keep doing what you’ve always been doing, you can protect her.”

“Now that I think of it, I think starting next spring we’re going to be reassigned to the eastern gates. That might be some good luck.”

Every three years, squads are rotated between the gates. That’s probably in place to stop things from getting in a rut, help deepen the bonds between all the soldiers, and make sure the work winds up being the same everywhere, but I don’t really care too much about the actual details. All I care about is the fact that this upcoming spring, my squad is going to be reassigned to the eastern gates. Those gates face the highway, so

they have the highest amount of traffic out of all of the gates, and it'll be the easiest place to get information from. It's the gate through which the largest number of strangers come through, so it'll be the place where I'll need to be the most vigilant.

"You'll need to be on your guard, and don't let anything slip by when you're gathering information," says Otto. "I think it would be a good idea for you to figure out how you can use your connections with the other soldiers, and go over how they can get in contact with you so that you can start moving as soon as even the slightest strange thing happens. I'll help, too. After all, Benno's sticking his nose into all sorts of things these days, so it's not like this doesn't affect my family either."

With a defiant grin, he makes a fist and flexes his bicep, bending his elbow, making the sign we soldiers use to wish each other a good fight.

"Sir. Let's definitely keep her safe."

I return his grin and down the last of my berea, washing the last of my melancholy away. My cup clacks against the table as I set it down. I clench my fist and bend my elbow, then tap my fist lightly against Otto's.

"Yeah. My family's one of this city's families, so I'll protect them too."



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